

Burnout

by LabRat

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Summary: Temperatures rise and impulse takes over when Lois and Clark find themselves locked in a garage while on assignment at an Indy meet. A milder version of the nc-17 rated story.

Burnout

BURNOUT By Doc. Klein's LabRat

Notes:

For those of you unfamiliar with the name, George A. Romero was the mastermind behind a run of fairly successful schlock horror zombie movies in the '80's/early '90's. Dawn of the Dead, Day of the Dead etc. And for UK and elsewhere FoLCs (or even those in the US who just plain don't watch sports [g]) Tommy Lasorda was a well-known baseball coach.

The song (like there's really anyone out there who doesn't already know!) is Billy Joel's AN INNOCENT MAN. And yes - Clark got the lyrics messed up. [G] But I agree with him - they fit. Actually, the entire song does.

Given the circumstances, I just couldn't resist using a dialogue line from Michael Jamin and Sievert Glarum's script of CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK. You'll know the one I mean when you get there. ;) My thanks go to them and the rest of the writers for some great inspiration and with apologies for the 'theft'.

Thanks as ever to my proofers, Becky, Elaine, Kath, LadyBiker and Leapfrog. Without whom to keep me on my toes and fire up the imaginative juices with their comments and queries and bail out ideas after listening to my pathetic whining about how it wasn't working out or that I'd locked myself in the woodshed again without a key...you'd be reading a far poorer and shorter story. Many of those ideas are included here, with their permission, as just too good to pass up. Far too many to mention individually, and often it was a

case of GMAT [g] as we came up with the same idea at the same time, or variations thereof, but those who contributed know how grateful I am for the inspiration. You guys are the best. This poor writer thanks you for keeping her sane - and giving her a few LOLs along the way.

BURNOUT

Lois Lane waved a disgusted hand in front of her and stepped back hastily, out of the way of the roaring blast of heat and fumes that swept by and into the distance in a haze of oil. She glared after the black and red gleaming monster that had just hurtled past her at well over 100 miles an hour, as it screamed to a halt in front of its pit crew. It was immediately enveloped by a seething mass of black and crimson suited figures, all apparently desperate to attend to its every gas-guzzling need. Lois wished she got that much attention when she put *her* car in the shop.

"Hey! Haven't you ever heard of the pedestrian's right of way!" she yelled after the oblivious driver.

"It's a racetrack, Lois. Pedestrians don't *have* right of way," an amused voice said at her shoulder, startling her. She turned her head to bestow a dark, steady look on her partner that would have melted icebergs.

Clark noted it with an inner grin, which he was careful not to let her spot creeping up on him. If she'd been on board at the time, and someone had succeeded in getting her mad enough - which would undoubtedly not have been an entirely difficult task - Titanic would never have sunk, he thought, stifling another smile.

"Been doing some sniffing around?" he asked, looking away and sweeping the line of garages behind them with an interested glance. "I thought you said you weren't going to move from that cafÃ© until you'd had at least another dozen cups of coffee to fortify yourself for the...what was it?...trials of watching a bunch of grease-monkeys get all excited about some third-rate dinky toys?"

"Yeah, Ye-hah! How could I pass up on the thrill of a lifetime?" Lois drawled sarcastically and then added a complaint, "For your information, the coffee tasted of diesel, just like everything else around here, and - "

"Methanol," Clark corrected blandly. "They use methanol, not diesel. It's specially formulated for -- "

" - and I figured," Lois rumbled over him like an attacking Russian tank, with a glare for the interruption, "the sooner I get us our scoop, the sooner I can get outta here." She wrinkled her nose as she glanced down at her clothes, which were beginning to look the worse for wear. "God, I would kill for a shower right now!"

Clark opened his mouth to mention that it was actually *his* scoop and then changed his mind. Not least because of the distracting roadblock her final comment had thrown into the path of his thoughts. With considerable effort he shook off the images her words had caused to blossom in his head. Don't go there, Kent, he warned himself dryly.

"So...find anything?" he blurted out, tugging at the neck of his t-shirt, which seemed a mite suffocating all at once.

"Not unless you count discovering that my lungs don't work on high-octane fuel, I smell like a gas station and it's going to take at least half a dozen washes to get this gunk out of my hair," Lois told him, grumpily, too wrapped up in her own discomfort to notice his.

She gestured a hand over her skirt, which had somehow picked up a couple of black oil streaks along its hem. "And this skirt is ruined! Oh, I am going to *get* Perry for this! Just wait till he gets my expenses sheet *this* month! This was a genuine Ralph Credenza creation!"

Clark looked her over, less than sympathetic. "Well, I did tell you you should dress down for this one," he reminded her. Big mistake. Lois just wasn't in the mood to hear any 'I told you so's. And, most definitely, she wasn't about to hear them from *him*. Not that she ever was, he told himself wryly.

Her deep brown eyes flashed over him like an incendiary bomb and she snorted. "Well, not all of us can dress down like you can, Kent." She made an exaggerated moue of disapproval as her scathing gaze raked over the faded blue jeans and simple black t-shirt. "I mean really, Clark." She stabbed a hand at the bright neon logo spread across his chest. "Batman?"

Clark ducked his head to view the yellow oval with its black bat centerpiece and then shrugged as he looked up at her again. "It came free with my last box of Cheerios," he defended his sense of haute couture. "Well, you had to send away twenty tokens and a dollar eighty five, but that's *almost* free, especially when you consider -- "

Lois punctuated this explanation with a heavy sigh and spun on her heel to stare heavily out into the currently empty racetrack. Heated air, thick with the cloying scents of oil and methanol, stirred restlessly in her hair as she folded her arms tight beneath her breasts.

"This is Hell," she murmured. "I'm in Hell and I'm never getting out of here and - " She loosened her arms and kicked savagely at a nearby wall of tires, her growl rising almost to a wail, " - and what on earth persuaded Perry to send us to this...this...hive of insanity!!"

Clark sighed. "A story?" he suggested as he leaned casually against the edge of the tire wall. They had been stacked somewhat recklessly over-height and Lois' attack on the defenseless, inanimate objects had caused a ripple far down in the stack that was like to have them toppling at any moment. Clark pushed a shoulder surreptitiously against them, settling them back safely into place, and winced as Lois kicked at them again, glaring ferociously as though they were the sole and chief architects of her current frustration.

"This isn't a story, Kent! It's *sports*!" She kicked again, harder this time.

"Hey! You wanna cut that out!" A harassed technician in the deep gold overalls of the North-Andersson Team hurried for them with a frown. "You know how much this equipment costs?"

"Uh, yeah. Sorry. We were just leaving," Clark assured him hastily as he flashed a bright smile at the man and took hold of his partner's arm. Lois turned a laser glare on the technician and opened her mouth - a hair's breadth away from getting them thrown out of the grounds, out of any chance of getting their story and an inch away from dashing all of Clark's plans into dust - and then clenched whatever she'd been about to say behind grinding teeth as Clark hustled her out of the garage and away from temptation. Furious she may have been, but she wasn't dumb.

She fumed silently as Clark urged her firmly across the pit lane with a hand clenched around her elbow. But silent frothing at the mouth had never been her forte. She'd just never been any good at that kind of thing. Silence lasted all of three seconds and she was already muttering under her breath as her partner found them a quiet corner in anticipation, where she could rant to her heart's content without disturbing anyone or getting them evicted, press passes or no.

"Sports! How many times do I have to *tell* him? How many times before he gets it through that thick skull of his that I *don't* *do* -- "

" -- sports," Clark finished for her wearily as he let her go. He'd been hearing the same complaint - or variations thereof - ever since he'd picked her up at her apartment that morning and his patience was beginning to wear ever so slightly thin on the subject.

"Come on, Lois, it's not that bad," he said and then, contradicting her somewhat recklessly, "And, besides it's not sports." He turned back to view the hustle and bustle of the pit lane and spread an encompassing hand at it. "This is a multi-million dollar industry we're talking about here. It's exciting. It's dangerous. It's front page! It's...potential Pulitzer," he enticed her.

Lois didn't look impressed. Her frown darkened.

Clark sighed again. He glanced around them, checking that no one was close enough to overhear, although the constant roar of idling engines and machinery around them made it unlikely. Even so, he bent his head close to hers and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial hiss as he continued, "If Tirelli *is* spiking that engine fuel of his, like my source claims, we could be onto something here that could blow the whole thing wide open. We'd be front page all over the world."

Lois sniffed, folding her arms again. A sniff that Clark was sure meant that she doubted any one of *his* sources could come up with information that explosive. Especially when none of *her* sources had been able to pick up even a hint of skullduggery. Clark hid a grin. Boy, she just hated it that it was him that'd gotten first sniff of this one, didn't she?

Despite himself, the grin spread as he studied her. He dug a hand into the pocket of his jeans. "Here," he said, amused, as he emerged with a handkerchief and reached for her cheek. Lois jerked her head

away from his approaching hand suspiciously. "Keep still. You've got a smudge," he explained and then looked surprised when she batted his hand away from her with a quick, exasperated growl.

"What are you, my mother? I can get it myself." She rummaged furiously in her purse and came up with a compact. She snapped it open and her eyes widened a touch as she glared into the mirror. She snatched hurriedly at the handkerchief and scrubbed distastefully at the wavering black stripe marring one cheek.

Clark watched her make her repairs, gifting himself a few, quiet moments spent in study of her. With her attention focused on the mirror, he was able to do something he rarely got a chance at. Just watch her. Just take a moment out to savor every soft plane and curve of her face, without her being aware of his attention. He'd had to make a serious effort to stop doing it while they were working at the Planet. It was getting embarrassing the amount of times she'd caught him at it lately.

His eyes traced the smooth, swan's curve of her throat and the way that the small, fragile latticework of the earrings she wore cast reflections of light against her skin from where they dangled and glittered against her neck. How strands of dark, gleaming hair escaped her sleek, shoulder-length bob to brush against her skin. He imagined his fingers trailing that same path, running their tips softly along the pulse line he could see beating steadily just below the cradle of her jaw. Considered what it would feel like to brush the back of one hand to follow the line up onto her cheek and explore its gentle curves and sharp angles before he slipped his fingers into the dark mass framing her face. And her eyes...those dark, glorious, peat-colored eyes...

...which were studying him curiously.

"What?" Lois demanded. She darted a frantic look into the mirror, sure she must have missed something horrendous given the intent study he was making of her face and came back to him, with a frown, when she found nothing obvious. "What?!"

"Uh, nothing. I mean I was just thinking -- " He seemed to give himself a mental shake and added quickly, "I have to go!" He lifted his arm and glanced at his watch.

"Go?"

"Yeah, one of the mechanics on Team Continental said he'd show me how they can strip down a car to its chassis in just under ten minutes," he said, sounding impressed.

Lois rolled her eyes. "Wowee!" she drawled. Her tone turned corrosive with acerbic wit. "Remind me to take you cruising down Suicide Slum sometime. They've got guys down there who can do it in three."

Clark gave her that 'My, aren't we just too cute for words today?' look that always drove her nuts and followed it with its companion, patented condescending and tolerant smile, as though he was humoring a child. That drove her nuts too. She scowled.

"Ah, but can they put it back together again afterwards?" he said and

then, dismissing her foul mood with that same touch of exasperated condensation, which seemed to put it on par with a child having a tantrum - best ignored entirely - he added, "I should just have enough time to watch before I have to check in with my source."

He put a hand on her shoulder briefly, mock apologetic. His smile turned sweet as ten-year-old honey and twice as thick. "Course, I'd *love* to stay and debate the sports issue, but...no can do, I'm afraid. I'll be back in an hour or so. Meet you here, okay?" He squeezed his fingers gently against her shoulder, before he turned away.

A couple of paces further on, he paused and turned back with a warning frown. "Oh, and Lois? Stay out of the garages, huh? If Adam does come up with something we can use I don't want to waste half the afternoon trying to sneak you back in under the wire, after you get yourself thrown out." He pointed a single finger at her in emphasis, raised admonishing brows, and then walked away again.

"I can sneak myself back in!" Lois snapped at his retreating back and then fumed silently, setting balled fists on her hips and all but stamping her foot at him as he looked back at her with another of those faint smiles and waggled his fingers at her in a cocky wave. She watched him go, glowering.

"Men!" she muttered. "*Kansas* men!" Entirely unnoticed by her, her fingers strayed a path to where his hand had lain briefly on her shoulder and rested there a moment, sure they could discern a faint, lingering warmth, before they dropped back to her side. She sighed. Now, what was she going to do?

She glanced around her at the forbidden garages and almost considered nosing around in them, just to prove that she wasn't going to be told she couldn't by *him*! Think again, Kent! But, in all honesty, they didn't hold much appeal for her. She might as well consider spending her day off at the local gas station, talking to the guy in the greasy overalls and watching him torque wrench his libido. While hitting on hers. She'd been approached by more than one would-be lothario already.

What was it with these guys? They drove a car for a living for pity's sake! And this was supposed to impress her? Yeah right. She'd be as likely to be impressed by your average Metro cabby. She couldn't really see the difference between the two. As far as she was concerned, cars were something that got you from A to B and back - without needing a callout from a mechanic if you were lucky. Well, with the exception of her Cherokee. She had a fond spot for that Cherokee.

Her eyes drifted back to her traitorous partner. This was all his fault of course. He was the one who'd persuaded Perry there was a story in this. She paused, letting her instincts finally get a word in edgeways over her annoyance at having a perfectly good Saturday ruined. Okay, so maybe there *was* a story in the middle of this. She had to admit that her senses were tingling and there was a familiar, heavy feeling in her gut that had been there ever since she'd listened to Clark pitch his source's suspicions at their editor the previous day.

She just wished he hadn't seen fit to include her in the deal. This

was one story she'd have been happy to hand to him, front page headline, Kerth, Pulitzer and all. Well, she amended almost instantly, maybe not the Pulitzer. And probably not the Kerth either. She scowled blackly at the back of her partner's neck as he stood at the end of the pit lane, outside the last but one garage in the block. And that story darned well better have my byline on it, buster, she told him silently. If you ever track it down that is.

She continued to fix that icy stare on him as he stood with the group of Team Continental mechanics, chewing the proverbial motor racing fat. They were grouped around an undoubtedly sleek piece of machinery in the shape of Continental's revolutionary car for the '94 season: a new design that merged the best of classic racing lines with the hard-edged aggression of the very latest in high-tech mechanics. (Clark had bored her with a recitation of the team's press release in the car, on the way to the racetrack. Only he could have it memorized. She had feigned a deep, overwhelming interest in the design features of the nearest set of traffic lights until he'd taken the hint and retreated into silence.)

Clark was listening intently as the mechanic crouched down to run a hand across the car's gleaming, crimson wing, obviously pointing out some modification of deeply spiritual significance. Clark, Lois noted with a derisive inner snort, looked as fascinated as a little kid allowed up to view the cockpit of the airplane he was riding to his vacation.

As she continued to study him, her thoughts drifted aimlessly and her anger went with them. Her eyes followed the quick gesture of his arm as he offered some opinion, drawn immediately to the way in which the close-fitted t-shirt stretched taut with the motion. The cotton sheath clearly defined the broad, muscular planes of his chest and shoulders. She had never really noticed before how...well, *big* he was. How well...proportioned. How...how...*wow*...

/Yeah, right!/ a snide voice spoke up, way back in her mind. /Sure you haven't. So, who was it wasted twenty minutes yesterday watching those muscles flex as he put those reference books back on the top shelf for Kelly Selvantis? *And* almost missed her deadline while she was doing it?/

Lois ignored that voice, frowning slightly. Without realizing it, her tongue ran its way lazily across her upper lip before she caught the lower lightly between her teeth. She nibbled at it fitfully as she concentrated on the way her partner's body moved, as he hunkered down to get a closer look at the car. Boy, those jeans were tight! Her eyes widened slightly and then narrowed appreciatively...

"Mmmmmmm...you know, I'll say this for you, Kent, you certainly are one hunk of a -- "

She clapped a hand to her mouth, appalled, as she heard that low growl emerge from it. To her horror, Clark jerked up his head, looking directly at her through the crowd hustling around the pits, his eyes finding her unerringly through the mass of moving bodies and piercing her in place like twin lasers. He frowned as he met her startled expression. Lois had the distinct impression that she looked like a deer caught in headlights as she stared guiltily back at him.

/Don't be ridiculous! He couldn't have heard!/ she told her gibbering mind as she tore her eyes from his and whipped around, closing them tight. /Please...!/ she begged silently and couldn't have said just what she was pleading for. That he would lose interest? That he would stay where he was? Or that he would appear at her side in that way he had of sneaking up on her when she least expected him to and ask if she'd just said what he thought he'd heard?

/You're losing it, Lane!/ she told herself scathingly. /You are definitely losing it!/

She gathered up her nerve and glanced back across her shoulder. He was still there. He was still watching her. Her inner self suppressed a quick yelp. She held in a deep, shaken breath and forced a smile onto her lips. She gave herself points for managing to raise her hand slightly and even give him a small, casual wave. Clark paused and then smiled back at her, somewhat tentatively, she thought, from the midst of her own panic. Then, he turned his attention back to the mechanics as one of them tapped him on the shoulder and pointed at the nearest wheel arch. Relief washed over Lois, weakening her knees momentarily, and then was replaced by a slow dawning sense of disbelief and utter dismay.

What had she been thinking? How **could** she be thinking - no, she wasn't. She wasn't thinking anything of the sort! That was ridiculous! Crazy, even!

A soft moan of denial trickled from her lips. Her eyes returned to Clark. His face was in profile to her as he talked with the mechanics. She couldn't see his eyes. But she didn't have to. She could conjure up every expression that had ever been in that deep, sensitive, chocolate brown gaze. How they warmed to the color of mocha when he smiled at her. Deepened to glow with amber and mahogany when they shared a quiet moment, late in the newsroom, working on their notes or debating the course of their next story, excitement burning in them like fire, matching her own. In anger they were dark chips of obsidian, but that was an emotion rare to him as ice was in sunlight and she saw it hardly ever, except for moments when he was driven to rage by some uncovered injustice. Or...when she pushed him just that inch too far.

/Been brushing up on your thesaurus, Lane?/ The snide inner voice was back. /Five hundred ways to describe plain old brown eyes - that's a great use of a Kerth award-winning reporter's time./

But...there was nothing just plain old brown about Clark's eyes. There was nothing just plain old anything about the man. She guessed she'd always known that. Known it right from the first moment she'd looked up into those eyes and found herself drowning in their depths. Drowning without even knowing she was in danger. Yes, she had known. Of course she had. She just hadn't been listening to what her own heart had been telling her, that was all.

Her heart? She shook her head sharply, trying to deny the implications of the lingering thought, furious with it suddenly for betraying her like this. Her heart didn't know what it was talking about! The ludicrous thought echoed and her anger couldn't stand firm against it. It dissolved into the swell of confused, conflicting

emotions clamoring in her head and uppermost in that groundswell was not joy but fear.

A sudden, sick feeling of panic tightened in the pit of her belly. This wasn't happening. It just *couldn't* be happening! Not to her! /Not again...please.../ a smaller, trembling voice echoed, deep in her mind and barely heard.

But it *was* happening. Events and thoughts were slotting neatly into place in her traitorous, organized mind, all of them making sense where she had never noted them before. How, often, over the past weeks and months she had found herself thinking about her partner in the odd, quiet moments when he should have been furthest from her mind. How her gaze would follow him softly across the Bullpen, watching the familiar gestures as he talked with colleagues; the way his smile lit up the room around her; the way his eyes grew a warm amusement, deep in their depths, when he teased her. How she didn't even *mind* his teasing her. How, in fact, she secretly loved it when he did. Providing he didn't push it any. And she was in the mood to appreciate it. And how she could lose herself in study of him until time snuck up on her and surprised her with the vanishing act it had pulled right under her nose.

Lois shivered and wrapped her arms around herself reflexively. If she could have seen her reflection in a mirror in that moment she would have been shocked by the waxen pallor of her face, of how huge her eyes seemed in the midst of that pale oval; stricken and lost. But her thoughts ran on, unchecked, as though a floodgate of emotion and understanding that had previously been locked tightly in the depths of her soul had suddenly been released. Suddenly escaped. And, once free, rushed to overwhelm her in a furious, surging tide before she could safely imprison them again in some deep, dark corner where she would never have to examine them. Never have them threaten her.

Goosebumps had risen on the skin of her upper arms as her fingers rubbed fitfully against them. It reminded her of the way her skin tingled when his fingers brushed against hers in passing or by chance. Of how good he smelled when he leaned over her to help her edit her story or point out some 'error' in her text. Soap. The fresh-laundered scent of his shirts. The faint woodsmoke and clove tang of his cologne...

Lois shook her head, as though her disbelief could change things. It didn't.

She was...in love with her partner?

/*Love*?! Hey, let's not get carried away here, girl! We're talking good, old- fashioned lust! Aren't we?/

No. No, they weren't. It was more than just the simple, raw urging from her libido, though that too played its part. She retained enough honesty with herself to realize that. She risked another glance at her best friend and partner and her eyes softened. A lock of that incredibly thick, black hair had found its way onto his forehead, giving him a vulnerable, little boy charm that kindled a small, soft warmth deep inside her. How many times had she wished she could put up a hand and push that wayward lock back into place? He'd smile down at her...that slow, warm smile that she was sure he reserved just for

her...and she'd stroke her hand through the dark, silky waves. They *would* feel like silk, she was sure. And then he'd put his arms around her and ---

Her fingers pressed themselves tight to her lips, trembling suddenly. She closed her eyes.

She was in love with her partner. Lord help her, but she was.

"Hey...hey, are you okay, honey?"

Her eyes flew open and she stared blankly at the small, blonde woman standing in front of her. The woman wore huge ear mufflers and a gold t-shirt with North-Andersson printed across her chest. She was looking concerned as she put a hand against Lois' sleeve. "You're looking real pale. Are you okay?" she said again.

Lois removed her hand from her mouth. "I -- " She hauled in a heavy breath. "I'm feeling a little nauseous," she whispered, which was surely the truth. "The...the fumes. You know?" The panic welled up in her again and she blurted, "I - I need some air. I -- "

Her hand fluttered aimlessly in the first direction she thought of and she headed out after it, rushing blindly for the first, quiet haven she could find; somewhere where she could be alone and deal with the terror clenching in her chest.

Somewhere as far away from her partner as she could get.

He had taken to scanning the garage block when he didn't find her at the spot they'd arranged as a meeting point, his impatience growing when he failed to spot her on his first sweep and turning anxious when he got the same result on his second.

For a moment he'd wondered whether she'd managed to get herself evicted after all - probably on purpose considering how furious she was at being here in the first place - but he knew it was unlikely. Even Lois wouldn't take a fit of pique that far.

Although...she was carrying it much further than he'd bargained on her doing. His hopes that her annoyance would fade once she accepted the inevitability of being here were proving more optimistic than he'd counted on. Earlier, in fact, he'd been so keen to believe her mood was changing, that she was mellowing, that he'd let himself get sucked into his own fantasies. There had been that ridiculous incident back at Team Continental's garage, when he'd thought he'd heard her say his name and...and, well, whatever it was she'd said it certainly *hadn't* been what he'd thought he'd heard, *that* was certain.

Clark had blushed with the memory, ashamed of himself for even harboring the thoughts he'd had. In fact, considering how mortified Lois had looked when he'd glanced, startled, in her direction, in response to her low growl from far across the pit lane, what she *had* said had probably been something so scathing that even she had been embarrassed by her ferocity in voicing it. Her own acidity could catch her like that sometimes. Not very often - maybe once in a

decade - but just occasionally she seemed to surprise even herself with her virulence. Not that she'd ever apologize or backtrack, but there would be a faint, disconcerted spark in her eyes and the subject would be changed - signs that Clark had learned to read, as easily as he read the sky for omens of sunshine after a storm, as Lois in apologetic mood.

Still, even mad as hell she was a professional and he doubted she'd try sabotaging the possibility of a world exclusive, even if she did want to kill him. On the other hand...maybe she had decided to take matters into her own hands and do some covert snooping on her own? Now that would fit. He was sure she was convinced she could sniff out something far easier than he could. Her faith in her own abilities was absolute - and in *his* abilities absolutely non-existent.

Worried by then, he'd extended his search. In that mood, Lord knew where she'd gotten herself to. Or what she'd gotten up to either.

And then he'd hit a cold spot in his scan, a solid wall of blank darkness - a pile of lead storage boxes clustered at the far end of the block. Moving a couple of yards to his right to circumvent them, he'd hit paydirt - and found his partner, huddled morosely on a low wall of tires in a dark corner of one of the storage bays.

Confused and more than a little concerned by now, he'd woven his way through the press of technicians and pit crews towards the bay.

He paused in the entrance now and stepped slightly aside as a mechanic rolled a trolley filled with spare parts past him. He had come looking for her eager to impart his news, keen to map out the next step in their campaign, to revel in listening to her debate and argue, thrust and parry, and just downright babble her way to a genuine Grade A Lois Lane Plan. Anticipating her excitement when she learned what he'd discovered, when she realized that his source hadn't just been blowing the smoke she'd accused him of, when she understood that there was a dynamite, five alarm story right here, ready to fall into their laps.

But despite his eagerness to find her of a moment earlier, he found his impatience fading and his excitement with it as he watched her, unnoted and unobserved, from the shadows. Edging further to ensure that he wasn't in anyone's way, he leaned up against the wall of the bay, slipping his hands into his pockets as he studied his oblivious partner thoughtfully.

She looked so...well, forlorn was the only word that came to mind.

He knew she hadn't wanted this assignment. She'd made that pretty clear. More than once. And it was no secret either that she blamed him for ruining her plans for the one Saturday in the month, she had informed him blisteringly the previous afternoon, that she'd intended to spend working on her handicap at Green Havens Golf Club. (You know, Kent? It's called leisure time. It's what days off are *for*!) Forget that Lois Lane wouldn't know leisure time if it ambushed her out of a clear blue sky. That, she had informed him, wasn't the point. Of course it wasn't. The point was he'd had the temerity to ruin her plans to take the day off on the one day in probably her

entire life she'd decided to try acting like a normal person. *Big* mistake.

He knew she'd been miserable all day, but he'd harbored hopes that she'd perk up and forgive him for spiking her plans when he told her that his source had come through for them. That the story was there for the taking. That he could just smell Pulitzer in the air, close enough that he could almost reach out and touch it.

The enticing thoughts of Pulitzers, awards or even bylines hadn't been what were driving him though. The bottom line was, he'd wanted to impress her. He sighed. Oh, getting the headline - and his byline under it - was important to him: this story would be a major coup and a real boost to his career and wouldn't look bad on his resume either. And it had been *his* from the start. His source. His instincts pushing him to pursue it. His nose for news telling him there was a definite scent of something rotten in the tire pile hanging in the air. He had waited a long time for that.

But what had really motivated him was that chance to impress his brilliant, beautiful partner. To show her once and for all that he wasn't just the 'Hack from Nowheresville' she'd once accused him of being. That he had talent to match hers, was just as focused, that they made a pretty good team. Oh, they'd come a long way from the days when she had made him pretty much aware that she saw him as a tag-along nuisance on the best of days and a ton weight millstone round her neck on the bad...but there was still that friction, slight though unrelenting, between them. And it had taken hard work, mostly from him, to make her see that he was someone worth working with, a partner she could accept and count on. Someone she could value, both in the office and as a friend.

Someone she could love?

He shook his head, irritated with himself. One thing at a time, Kent; you're a friend, a good friend, and right now, he reminded himself, with another glance at his despondent, oblivious partner, it looks like she could do with one.

He sighed again, more heavily this time, tasting all of his hopes and plans turn dry as dust in his throat, yet knowing none of them mattered. Not right now. Something had upset her, that was pretty clear, and he doubted it was missing out on practicing with her five iron on the straight. She was sitting with her elbows balanced on her knees, her chin sunk into the support of her hands and her eyes were distant and unhappy as they stared at the rainbows hidden in a patch of oil on the concrete floor.

Clark straightened, taking his hands from his pockets and pushing himself clear of the post he was leaning on. His shoulders tightened as he took his first step towards her, as though he was bracing himself for some unpleasant task. His shadow chased across the surface of the oil pool as he approached her, drawing her attention. She raised her head and their eyes met.

To his surprise, a dull, crimson flush rose in her cheeks and her eyes widened slightly. While he hesitated, considering that, a slim figure dressed in silver and blue padded coveralls strutted out of the edge of his vision and plunked himself down on the tires at Lois' side. It placed the green helmet with red flashings it was carrying

nonchalantly on its knees and leaned forward to view her face with a grin. Teeth flashed in a smile that would have had toothpaste manufacturers falling over themselves to offer ad. contracts had they seen it. He murmured in her ear.

Lois started violently - obviously the newcomer's approach hadn't registered until he'd spoken. Her head whipped around to view the interloper. It came back momentarily to Clark as she darted a small, almost apprehensive look at him from beneath her lashes. Then she looked away, turning back to her admirer and plastering one of her finest grade one bland and professional smiles on her face as she gave him her full attention. Clark had the distinct and unpleasant feeling that she was grateful for the diversion. That she was using it to avoid him.

But why?

She couldn't still be that mad at him, surely? And besides, she hadn't looked mad. Just miserable.

Clark turned his attention to the newcomer. He was familiar. A small, but well built man with striking Mediterranean features, set off by startlingly bright blue eyes, like chips of winter ice against the dark swarthiness of his mobile face. He motioned with a gloved hand, his gestures filled with the quick, mercurial fire of his Latin origins and Clark decided he didn't much like the way those ocean-blue eyes were wandering over his partner's slim frame as their owner sized her up.

He glanced back at the helmet cradled in the crook of Mr. Ocean-Blue's arm and recognition slotted into place. Of course. Cincerno Frenetti. Team Tirelli's newest acquisition, generally considered by most of the racing press to be the best, raw talent currently on the racetrack. Hotly tipped to be this year's CART Champion, if he could contain that Latin temperament of his on the track *and* in the nightclubs he was known to frequent off of it, and focus that undoubtedly natural racing talent where it mattered most.

Frenetti. The hero of the tifosi; the favored son of his local Tuscany village; smalltown boy made good (the thought made Clark smile briefly) and - his eyes widened slightly and then narrowed as several, salacious and outrageous tabloid headlines appeared vividly in his mind in quick succession -- and all round playboy lothario of the track.

He returned his attention to the Italian, reforming the scowl as he considered the man's track record. And not the one in the car. And, whereas Clark considered such alley-cat behavior deplorable in any man, he found it absolutely intolerable when the prey the would-be lecher was currently focused on was his own partner. And friend. And...and whatever.

A muscle ticked in his jaw as his hearing narrowed in on the Italian's smooth, seductive tones.

Cincerno was chuckling over something Lois had said, a deep, masculine burr, heavy-laced with an abundance of testosterone. "My...how you call it..." He waved an expressive hand and pondered a moment with a boyish expression of puzzlement before he grinned

triumphantly, "...trailer. You like. Why you no come visit? This place...not good for pretty woman. Dirty. Smell bad. Much...lot of noise. You come. We have caf  . We talk. You smile, huh, bellissimo? Pretty woman like you should smile, no? No look so sad. Cincerno," he stabbed a finger proudly into his covered chest, "he make the bellissimo signorina smile. Yes?"

Listening, Clark rolled his eyes. That had to be the most phony Italian accent he'd ever heard. Even for an Italian. Not to mention overdoing it a little on the 'how you say?' international language barrier. He'd seen Frenetti interviewed on TV. The man spoke better English than he did. And just who did this guy think he was talking to anyway? Some motor groupie bimbo? Did he think laying it on that thick was cute? Lois Lane wasn't going to be fooled by that nonsense.

Was she?

No, she wasn't.

The Italian's gesturing hand had apparently taken a wandering route on its return, coming to rest - seemingly of its own violation and entirely without its owner's knowledge - not on the lap it had started out from, but on Lois' left knee. Now, it was currently navigating a smooth path up towards the hem of a green checkered skirt that Clark abruptly decided was a mite too short for comfort. Cincerno grinned, favoring her with another spattering of rapid Italian that caressed the ear, and waved the hand not exploring Mount Lois in the air. Obviously hoping to distract the attention from its companion's ever upward journey.

Lois dropped her gaze to where that companion had begun flexing against her thigh, as though it was some malevolent insect that had just that second crawled there. Then she raised her head to smile brightly into Frenetti's hotly passionate eyes. She put a hand on his shoulder and swayed gracefully closer to whisper against his ear.

Frenetti's wide, beaming smile froze as he listened and began to turn slightly sick. As Lois straightened, the Italian stared at her, eyes gone round, and then followed her glance down at his hand. He jerked back his fingers as though the warm flesh he'd just been casually caressing had burned him like acid.

"Lois! There you are!" Clark decided she wouldn't mind being rescued - now that she'd dealt with the problem all on her own. He stopped in front of the couple and flicked a coolly dismissive glance over the CART driver before looking down at Lois with his warmest smile. It wasn't difficult. Somehow warm smiles just seemed to come naturally to him when he looked at his partner. But he laid it on thicker than most anyway, just to ensure that Frenetti took the point.

"I've been looking for you all over. Ready to go?" He held out a hand as he spoke, emphasizing the proprietary stance he had reflexively taken.

Frenetti bristled like a stray mongrel for an instant as he looked up at the reporter. Then he subsided, obviously thinking better of it as he took in the wide breadth of Clark's shoulders and his muscular build. He shot a glance at Lois as she got smoothly to her feet,

casually circumventing Clark's offered hand. She turned slightly to offer the Italian a polite nod.

"Nice meeting you," she said distantly, as she let Clark steer her away with a light, possessive hand against the small of her back. Frenetti looked after them with a slightly dazed expression. Actually, Clark considered, as he gave the driver a brief, backward glance, he looked like a man struck by lightning.

Clark hid a grin. Not a bad analogy. He often felt like he'd been struck by lightning himself when Lois was around. The grin slipped. Course, he'd never actually gotten the chance to put his hand on her knee before. Or her thigh. Frenetti had points on him on that one.

Lois barely held down a simmering fury as she allowed Clark to ease her through the crowd and out into the sunlight of the pit lane. The nerve of the guy! What did he think she was? Some racetrack groupie? Couldn't a girl just find a quiet place to sit and think around here?

The irked thought brought to mind why she'd been seeking a bolt-hole in the first place and she stumbled slightly, the touch of Clark's hand against her back suddenly searing her through the thickness of her jacket. She darted a glance up into his face, but he was concentrating on finding them somewhere out of the crush. She was searching frantically for some excuse to leave, for some escape route, when his annoyed mutter broke into her thoughts.

"What is it with these guys? They drive a car for a living and that makes them some kind of...babe magnet?"

Lois raised a brow, finding a sudden, unexpected refuge as she retreated thankfully to the lofty heights of her tallest feminist high horse. "*Babe* magnet?" she remarked, conveniently forgetting that she'd just about been thinking the same thing a moment before.

Clark gave her a sheepish glance that made her feel even better and retreated her nervous thoughts further out of sight. She was on familiar ground now. Safe ground. And he was on the defensive. She felt in control. Besides, there was no need for escape. No need for embarrassment. Was there? She hadn't *been* thinking what she thought she'd been thinking, earlier. No, of course she hadn't. Not at all. It had been an...an aberration. Yes, that was it. An aberration. A mental hiccup. The diesel fumes had obviously gone to her head for a time there. She'd simply confused a normal, healthy interest in a half-decent male body for...well, for something she wasn't going to think about now. Or later either.

"You've been spending too much time with Jimmy down in that men's club you boys call a locker room," she observed tartly, having successfully reorganized her feelings for her partner into the neat little box that they normally occupied.

/A neat, *safe* little box.../ the irksome little invisible friend who lived in the back of her head whispered at her, annoyingly. She squashed it firmly and set herself to ignoring its attempts at

sabotage.

"Anyway," she glanced back into the darkness of the storage bay and, seeking a distraction, murmured, "he wasn't that bad. You should have heard what that Australian said to me."

"Oh?" he said, hitching an interested brow at her and then snapping it into a sudden frown. "What Australian?" he demanded, coming to a halt and looking around them as though expecting to find the culprit nearby.

"Oh, I don't know. He was full of himself though. I had to promise to seriously consider his offer of a week at his ranch just to get him to leave." She broke off and scowled up at him. "I can take care of myself just fine, Clark. I don't need a bodyguard."

He had been listening to her, intrigued, but now he looked at her sharply. "Really?" He paused. "Not even if he's wearing a cape and dressed in spandex?" he said and she stifled a hard sigh at the familiar irritated note in his voice. An acid edge that made her defensive for no reason she could understand.

"Superman's not my bodyguard. He's my friend. And, no, I don't need him either. I was looking after myself long before he flew into town. And before you turned up at the Planet too," she reminded him.

He seemed about to say something more and then apparently changed his mind. "I know," he said quietly, watching one foot scuff against the concrete floor in front of him as he jammed his hands deep into his pockets. "I just wish - "

"What?" She put a hand on his arm, stopping that restless motion as he stayed silent. "Clark?"

He looked up at her. "I just don't want you getting hurt," he said and she felt her heart flutter giddily for an instant before the softness in his eyes hardened. "And I *don't* like you having to deal with guys like Frenetti either," he added darkly. He kicked at an empty drinks container discarded on the ground.

Lois caught the retort that flared up out of her just before it launched itself out of her mouth like a heat-seeking missile. How dare he?! Who'd told him he could appoint himself her protector? She'd been dealing with 'guys like Frenetti' since she was in Junior High and she hadn't noticed him around then to guard her any! Not that she *wanted* him to...She bit down on her lip sharply. But...she risked a small sideways glance at him as he settled his shoulders into a tight line and looked around them again, before guiding her across the empty pit lane...had that been a hint of jealousy she'd heard in his voice?

Jealous? Clark? She thought about that as he steered them to where the low pit wall separated the maintenance crews from the racetrack. Naturally enough, she easily ignored the obvious paradox of this new run of thought with the habitual ease she always brought to bear when faced with the hypocrite within her, not letting it faze her in the slightest. Even her eager beaver friend seemed to have gotten the hint and refrained from questioning as to just why the thought of her partner's jealousy might thrill her so when she had, only moments before, so vehemently declared her complete disinterest in what he

might think of her at all.

Lois leaned on crossed arms against the concrete and stared blindly out at the brightly colored flags waving gaily above the concourse buildings. Clark followed suit and silence settled itself heavily between them.

After a time, she said casually, "He said I could go horse-riding."

"Did he?"

The small, sly sideways flicker of her eyes towards him showed her that the line of his jaw had tightened markedly. She hid a smile and looked back at the white concrete behemoth of the building opposite and the deserted podium where the victorious drivers would receive their accolades after tomorrow's race.

"Mmmmmm. On his ranch. It's over four hundred thousand acres, you know." She turned around, resting her elbows against the wall at her back, and then used her hands to lever herself up onto its edge. Clark made a slight move towards her and then checked it, looking away again. Lois made it safely after a couple of abortive attempts. She swung her legs slowly as she straightened her shoulders and plopped her folded hands into her lap. "Can you imagine that? Four hundred thousand acres."

"I'm imagining."

She smiled and flicked an illusory speck of lint from her skirt, before smoothing her hands across the material to rest on her knees. Her legs swung gently. Back and forth. The muscle in Clark's jaw ticked slightly harder.

"Why horse-riding?" he said, when it became clear that she wasn't going to add anything further.

"Hmmmmm?" She shrugged. "I like horse-riding. He thought I might enjoy it. He has twenty horses on his ranch. The ranch isn't a horse ranch, of course. It's a sheep ranch. Because it's in Australia."

"Not all Australians farm sheep, Lois," Clark said, somewhat condescendingly. "Some of them farm kangaroos."

"They do not!"

"Yes they do. Kangaroo farming is a multi million dollar source of commercial meat produce in Australia, just slightly ahead of ostrich and crocodile products. And no, you don't."

"Huh? Don't what?"

"Like horse-riding. Or horses."

"I do too! How do you know what I like and what I -- ?"

"You told me. Last month. Remember? I suggested we spend our day off at the races and you told me horses were only fit for feeding dogs and the closest you were ever going to get to one was when you pushed

your cart past the pet- food section at your local Save-It-All."

"Oh. Well...well, I guess it just depends on who you get close to them with," she said and then winced as she heard the implication in that. That's not what she'd meant! "I-I mean - "

Lois looked away, feeling a sudden flush warm her cheeks. She looked down at her fingers, tracing circles on the wall, and stilled them with a frown.

You and your big mouth, Lane.

"I don't know many CART drivers who spend their off-season time riding horses anyway," Clark mused tartly. "Skiing, yes. Mountaineering. A little bit of hang-gliding. They tend to be pretty physical guys. When they can get away with it. Generally their team contracts preclude them getting involved with any dangerous activities during the times they're not racing. In case they injure themselves badly enough to stop them racing," he added as she glanced at him.

"You can't blame them, I guess. The teams, I mean. They've invested a lot of money in the drivers. Losing a season and most of your sponsors because the guy's just busted up a leg falling headfirst into a snowdrift can't be good news. Anyway, horse-riding is definitely out. Riding astride causes pull on the wrong muscle sets. Weakens the ones that matter when you race."

"That's not true," Lois scoffed and then immediately contradicted herself with a curious, "Is it?"

"Would I lie? So - " he glanced up on her, perched on the wall above him, "This *friend* of yours..."

The sly undertone in his voice stiffened her spine. "Dale," she supplied helpfully.

"Dale?" He straightened abruptly. "Dale *Swinton*?"

"Maybe." She hitched her shoulders nonchalantly in a shrug. "We were on first name terms. He didn't tell me his name was Swinton. I didn't tell him my name was Lane."

"Did you tell him your name was Lois?" Clark growled tartly and then protested, "Dale Swinton! Lois, that guy's one of the biggest jerks in -- "

"I thought he was...interesting."

Clark snorted.

Above them the flags snapped in the heated, oil-tainted breeze and the high scream of a fuel-rig spiked the air. A sudden wail from a nearby siren announced that the testing session was over and the activity around the team garages became more frenzied.

Lois glared at her partner. "So, are we going to get outta here anytime soon?" she demanded, ticked.

"Hey, I'm not the one wasting time socializing with - " he started and then he froze, eyes widening as his mouth fell wide. "My god - Adam!" he breathed.

"Clark!" Lois protested, annoyed, as he caught her by one arm and dragged her down off of the wall. He ignored her, putting a quick arm around her waist to steady her until he was certain she'd properly found her feet and then took hold of her arms, shaking her gently to get her attention as she tried to wriggle out of his grip.

"No, listen! I talked to Adam." He paused to slap a hand against his forehead. "How could I forget this?!" he berated himself and then went on, as she stared at him, wide-eyed, "Adam found proof that Tirelli's been using an illegal mix in their fuel system. And, get this! Not only is it illegal, but it's also highly toxic. Tirelli had a medical report commissioned that says his technician staff are risking a one in ten chance of contracting carcinogenic heart and lung defects just from inhaling the fumes from this stuff when they service the cars. Then he buried it so no one would find out."

Lois was frowning at him. "What kind of proof?" She ran a swift glance over him. He wasn't carrying anything obvious. "We need solid documentation here, Clark, or Perry's never going to - "

"Which is why Adam's going to make sure that the Tirelli garage is unlocked at precisely 2.45 a.m. tomorrow morning," Clark told her excitedly. "As you can imagine, the security in this place is brutal, but Adam says we'll have a window in the regular security patrol of about forty five minutes, which should be more than enough time."

"Time for what? Clark, Tirelli isn't going to keep paperwork in a *garage*!"

"No, but the technical specifications of the fuel *will* be stored on the main computer system in there. All of their records will be. All we have to do is get inside, tap into their mainframe and download the information onto disk." He sobered, reining in a touch. "Adam says we're on our own with getting into the garage. But, hey, that's a piece of cake for Lane and Kent, right?" He grinned at her and she couldn't help but respond to the sparkle in his eyes.

"Sounds like a plan to me," Lois agreed. But she couldn't resist adding, "You're *sure* the stuff we need is in there?"

"Absolutely."

She clenched sudden fists into the front of his Batman t-shirt, infected with his excitement now as she grinned up at him. "Front page here we come! Kent, I could kiss you!"

Clark froze. The exhilaration in his eyes melted into something less easily defined, something almost tender, as they met hers. Her grin faded...

...and, for an instant, time itself held its breath...

"I wouldn't object," he whispered, breaking into that silence, hot and heavy and weighted with the tingle of anticipation, which had

draped itself around them. His hands moved to settle themselves gently against her shoulders. His eyes were deep and warm and Lois could feel herself beginning to drown slowly in their softly glowing depths...

...and then she dragged her eyes away. She smoothed hands that shook just a little across his chest, firmly removing the creases her fists had put into the t-shirt.

"Can't right now, Kent. Don't have the time," she said airily, patting at his chest with one hand and easing herself out of the hands holding her close against him. So close she could feel the warm heat rising from his skin. Against her palm, his heart beat with a hard, hammering pulse. She drew in a rough breath and then flashed a bright smile up into eyes that had already begun to cloud over, growing distant and just a little cool.

"Now, come on, we've got to go get ourselves a Pulitzer!" she urged him, stepping back and putting space between them.

He let her free herself. She'd known he would. And she stamped down firmly on the small flicker of disappointment that welled up in her when he did.

"Lois?" He put a hand on her arm as she turned away. "Are you okay?"

He'd seen it in her face of course. The disappointment. She cursed herself for giving too much away. Or was it his perception in finding it in her, even when it was hidden as deeply as she could drive it down into the dark, locked compartments of her soul? Somehow he seemed to see right down into the heart of her innermost thoughts and emotions without even trying. Whatever, seen or sensed it he had and, being Clark, he put a meaning on it she'd never harbored.

"Listen, I didn't mean - I shouldn't have said anything. I was being dumb, fooling around, you know. It was stupid. I'm sorry if I - "

Lois widened the smile and took his arm firmly. "Oh, lighten up, Clark," she said, injecting an overly bright and determined cheerfulness into her tone and dismissing both his tentative apology and the moment in that instant of false exasperation.

"Hey," she glanced across her shoulder to the concourse behind them. "What you say we go have some coffee? We've got a raid to plan!"

He picked up on the hint immediately. The worried look that had been on his face became a smile. "Sounds like a plan to me," he agreed, echoing her.

Oh, Clark, she whispered to him silently. Don't you know that sometimes I'd give anything for you not to go along with me? That there are times I don't *want* you to agree with me?

His smile vanished and he gave her a mock suspicious look. Suddenly, just her partner again. Clark Kent, all round cheerleader and regular good guy. Ready to tease her out of a moment she was uncomfortable with and that was probably tearing an ache in his heart. "Who's buying?"

She turned him around with her for the concourse, falling in with his new, easy mood thankfully. "Well, it's your celebration, partner. I say you buy."

"Wait a minute. Sure it's my celebration. But the reason we're celebrating is because all my hard work paid off. I think I deserve a reward."

"Like I buy? I don't *think* so."

"Well, I seem to remember it is *your* turn." He nudged her with his hip, grinning at her. "I bought yesterday. Twice, actually."

"Geez, Kent, where *do* you get that competitive streak from? We're talking a lousy cup of coffee here, not buying me Tiger Stadium!"

"Well, okay." He shrugged agreeably, putting his hands in his pockets and letting her steer their course through the crowds as she slid an arm through his. "I'll buy. But only as you asked so nicely. And just so long as it *is* just coffee. I mean, if we're talking coffee *and* danish here, I'm just gonna have to remind you of the terms of our agreement of June fourth, nineteen ninety three, when you said, and I quote - "

"Don't quote me to me, Clark," she told him snippily. But her eyes were dancing as they met the laughter in his own and she grinned up at him as she tightened her hold on his arm, companionably.

It felt good to slip into the warm, familiar teasing that she knew so well.

And loved.

Yes, she admitted...and loved.

"Yes, I *know* all that, but I still say you didn't need to use a pepper spray on it!" Clark hissed in a stage whisper as he eased open the garage door and ushered his belligerent, unapologetic partner ahead of him and through the gap.

"What did you want me to use on it? Superior logic?" Lois snapped back, flouncing ahead of him and promptly regretting it as she tripped over the left wheel of the tarp shrouded lump sitting in the middle of the concrete floor. She glared at the offending race-car and squawked as her wild kick in its direction was foiled by Clark abruptly grabbing her by one arm and hauling her smartly out of its reach.

"You damage that and we get caught, you're on your own," he warned, letting her go as she yanked herself furiously clear of his grasp.

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, please - you're gonna get bent out of shape over a pile of..." her eyes flicked disdainfully over the shrouded vehicle, "...scrap metal?"

"That's a million dollars worth of *scrap metal*, Lois. Trust me, you're gonna be paying off the insurance for the next three thousand years."

Lois sniffed. But she skirted the vehicle, under its green tarp cover, with a new, wary respect and stood to peer into the near midnight darkness of the garage proper.

Clark, certain he'd convinced her to be careful, took a step back to surreptitiously scan the area outside and then, satisfied that they were in no immediate danger of discovery, gently closed the door to, wincing slightly at the faint scree of metal on metal as he did.

He turned his head to scowl at his oblivious partner. "Anyway, I could have dealt with it," he went on, making his way carefully through the scatter of boxes and tool cases and assorted unidentifiable junk between them to come up alongside her. "If you'd just let it alone and hadn't gone riling it up."

"What?"

"The dog, Lois."

"Oh, geez, are we back to that? *You* didn't have to deal with it. *I* dealt with it."

"Pepper spray hurts, Lois."

"So does having your throat ripped out," Lois muttered, peering more deeply into the shadows as she let her eyes adjust to the dim light. The garage sported only one, long and narrow, window and that was high up on its left wall. Lighting was at a premium in the pit lane beyond and what spilled weakly through the window was mostly a faintly ethereal glow of moonlight alone. Lois sighed. Then, giving him a sideways, acid glance and judging, accurately, that he wasn't taking this on board, "It was an *attack* dog, Clark. Does that mean anything to you? Attack? Like in 'violent assault'?"

"That was your pitch, wasn't it? It was only doing its job."

"Well, excuse me, but I happen to take exception to its *job* being to try ripping my leg off. It ticks me off. It was just lucky I'm pro gun control. A bullet in the head hurts more than stinging eyes."

"Lo-is..."

She gave him an irritated glance across one shoulder and then turned around to lean in close and place a mock placating hand against his chest. "Okay, fine, Clark, I promise - if Scooby Doo's still prowling around out there when we leave, I'll keep my hands off the pepper spray and throw you at him instead. If you're *really* lucky, he'll have brought along some of his buddies. You can gather them up in a circle and give them a lecture on aggression management. Happy now?" she finished, as she stalked away from him to begin scoping out the area.

"Only slightly," Clark said sardonically, pushing his hands into his pockets and mooching after her.

Lois grunted an unladylike breath, obviously an indication that she considered the subject closed. Clark sighed and paused beside a workbench. He took out one hand and idly picked up a wrench from the scatter of tools littering the surface, turning it in the fitful light as he studied it aimlessly.

He realized, belatedly, that it had probably been a bad idea to bring up the dog again. Actually, he amended wryly, it had probably been a less than good idea to mention it in the *first* place, let alone have the nerve to repeat the censure when Lois already considered she'd stomped his objections into the mud. And ground her heel in them too. He knew how well his partner responded to even the mildest of criticisms. Not that he wasn't prepared now and then to rattle her cage. Just a little. When he thought she deserved it. He wasn't *afraid* of her. And she did deserve it. Her spraying of the dog had been a complete over-reaction in his book, and liable to get them caught besides. He also suspected, by the very robustness of her stomping and the virulence of her heel grinding, that she knew it too.

But, regardless of who had the right of it, he really didn't want to provoke an argument now or upset her any. The long afternoon spent exploring the racetrack had been, mostly, very pleasant, as had the resultant easy mood it had fostered between them as they sat in her Jeep watching darkness settle and waiting out the hours for their chance at Tirelli's garage.

By then, he'd gotten over his surprise at how willing Lois appeared to be to let herself relax, to share something more of herself than just partner and friend, and how frenetically she seemed to be working on making him relax too. She had been trying so obviously hard to please him that he had been touched by her efforts, strange though they were. He couldn't explain the change in her mood after they left the caf  , except that he had the vague idea she was attempting to apologize for her earlier bad temper. Although he approached this theory with a degree of skepticism he might have reserved had LNN announced that elves had just been found cavorting on the White House lawn. Lois? Apologize? Not in this millenium, he suspected. Or the next.

Still, there were a myriad of ways to apologize without resorting to using the scary words and Lois, with long practice, was a master of most of them. And whatever the reasons for her change of direction, he'd enjoyed being the recipient far too much not to regret having lost that moment of intimacy in his accidental resurrection of the Partner from Hell over a slight disagreement on animal welfare.

Perhaps that was the point though, he considered heavily as he put down the wrench and picked up a thin rod of plastic coated metal, the purpose of which was less easy to define. He frowned at it. It had only been a moment; just illusion; nothing real about it...no matter how he might wish differently, and hanging on to that moment, living with the illusion, was the game of a fool. Sooner or later you had to face up to reality, cold and cheerless as it might be. And the reality was that his relationship with his temperamental and vivacious partner was more typically characterized by the last twenty minutes than it was by the entire twelve hours that had gone before them. Something would have come along to spoil things eventually,

sooner or later, with or without his interference.

He held back a sigh, twisting the rod in his hands. A small, inward smile touched his lips. Still...illusion or not, temporary insanity from Lois or not, it **had** been...real nice. He had been granted a glimpse of an entirely new partner. One that he had always suspected existed, buried deep beneath that hard and gleaming shell of professional armor she carried with her at all times, but which he'd never before been given the privilege of viewing.

Well, not voluntarily from her anyway.

It said **something**, didn't it? That trust? The sigh escaped him slightly. Trouble was, he just wasn't sure exactly what that something was.

And Lois wasn't giving him many clues.

They had spent the afternoon acting more like friends enjoying a day's sightseeing rather than partners out to track down a story. His smile widened. Almost like playing hooky. Amazingly, Lois had turned out to understand the concept after all. Letting go, leaving the world of adult responsibility behind, just for a few hours. Giving yourself over to the pleasure of having fun, enjoying the company you were with...just do nothing much but kick back and enjoy.

It had taken them little time to formulate plans for their raid and with those plans made the afternoon had stretched before them, a landscape of boredom. Well, for Lois at least. They couldn't leave the track and risk being shut out, unable to find a way back in. They were stuck, with little to do and nothing to occupy them until approximately twelve hours down the line. Business was concluded and the only prospect left to them - to while away the rest of the day - had been a thought that Lois had initially approached with all the enthusiasm of being asked to drive naked to work in the middle of the rush hour.

Clark, in the wake of the slightly awkward silence that had overtaken them, their conversation suddenly relegated to the potential minefield of small-talk, hadn't been looking forward to dragging a sullen partner around with him at all. And especially not when that partner had proved herself to be as pathologically averse to all things sports as Lois had.

He'd had the dismal feeling that her mood of the morning was going to make her seem like a pussycat compared to what she could come up with to make him suffer for having the bad taste to appropriate her leisure time. Not to mention - although she did and repeatedly - stranding her here in this 'testosterone-infested, macho-maniacal, Boy Toy Land' as she'd colorfully termed it. Among other things. A burst of highly literate pique that had impressed Clark deeply, despite its slightly deranged tone, simply for the fact that it had gone on in even more colorful terms for over a minute and a half without his partner apparently needing to pause for breath once. Leaving him wondering, awestruck, how she **did** that without the benefit of super powers.

Occasionally, Clark had considered balefully - when Lois **finally** ran out of breath and lapsed into vexatious silence - there were times when not even that spark of warm, electric heat deep within him

that he had come to associate habitually with close proximity to Lois Lane could make him glad to be in her company.

Well...almost.

He had sipped at his cooling coffee in the crowded little cafÃ©, as he hunted around for something innocuous enough to break the silence that wouldn't provoke her any. He wasn't inspired. Instead, he found himself mulling over all the ways his undoubtedly creative partner could find to punish him for her enforced imprisonment.

To his surprise though, it had been Lois who had broken the increasingly uncomfortable quiet between them. With a straightening of her spine and a resetting of her shoulders, an audibly deep sigh and a sudden smile that was so forced Clark thought it would probably require a crowbar to pry it off her lips, she'd made the brightly voiced suggestion that he show her the ten dollar tour.

"Might as well use that trivia soaked brain of yours for something, Kent, since it's around," she'd told him snippily as he'd let his surprise show.

"The tour?" he'd said. "A tour of what?"

"Of...well, I don't know. You're the expert aren't you? The big race buff?"

"Lois, I'm not an *expert*, I just like - "

"So, give me the tour. And make it the twenty dollar version," she'd said firmly as she rose to her feet and scooped up her jacket. "Include the interesting stuff."

She'd patted him on the arm in passing as she headed for the door, leaving him staring after her bemusedly as she added the parting shot, "What you waiting for, Farmboy? Come on! Impress me!"

Well, who could have resisted a challenge like that?

Certainly not her partner. Who'd been waiting for an opportunity like *that* one for longer than he cared to let himself consider and who usually only heard Lois voice it in his dreams.

Actually, Clark thought, looking back with hindsight, there had almost been a desperation about her desire to lighten the mood. A frantic need to set the pace, to keep on the move. He puzzled over that for a moment, taking a quick glance up from his study of the rod in his hand to where Lois was burrowing around at the back of the garage and then returning to it as though it might offer him more answers than she was likely to. He shook his head, recognizing the futility of looking for logic in his partner's moods and actions. Lois wasn't about logic and it made no sense to try finding it in her. She was just nature's way of keeping him on his toes, constantly on the hook of surprise, and that was all there was to that. Surprise hadn't quite covered the depth of his reaction though that afternoon as he quickly found himself in the company of a vivacious, fun-loving, witty and charming companion he didn't quite entirely know. He had been stupefied, pure and simple. If he hadn't known better, he'd have had to assume that his partner had been replaced by some kind of...clone.

He had always known that Lois had a sense of humor. But it had always been a sharply honed wit that cut with the precision of a battle lance, launched itself like a Sidewinder missile, and took no prisoners, and he'd too often been its victim to really enjoy it. Though he could - and secretly did - revel in the quickness of mind that produced it. But he had hitherto never suspected that Lois could be capable of making him laugh hard enough to nearly take him out at the knees and leave him gasping for breath. At least...not intentionally.

Lois, it seemed, with the definite scent of a story in the air, had generously decided to forgive him. Her earlier, downcast mood had promptly been discarded as she became a whippoorwill of suppressed energy, her laughter bright and unaffected as she teased and cajoled him into acts of reckless enjoyment.

She had given up complaining about their surroundings and aped a polite and keen interest in the tour they took of the garages and pit lane. He was almost entirely unable to detect her boredom she concealed it so ably. She hadn't even contradicted his steady spiel of anecdotes and jargon as he'd shown her the points of interest around the track. Well...not often. And she had laughed in all the right places.

It had been Lois' idea, not his, to watch the secondary races taking place that afternoon. By the time the final junk race was announced, she had been so overtaken by an excitement that seemed genuine - undoubtedly fueled by a competitive spirit that was unable to be denied for very long - that she had challenged him to a side bet on the result. When her car came in over the line a full length in front of its competitors, she had hugged him with all the exuberance and ingenuous innocence of a child. A spontaneous gesture that held no hint of the awkwardness between them that their earlier lapse of good judgement had engendered.

Clark, feeling his skin tingle and his heart stutter wildly in his chest, had breathed in deep and even allowed himself to hug her back. The moment of easy familiarity had gone a long way to stop him kicking himself for letting temptation get the better of his idiot mouth earlier in the day.

Even the fact that she had chosen the winning car less for its technical superiority than she had for its bright red and blue livery (that the driver's helmet predominantly incorporated yellow in its design didn't hurt) hadn't been able to spoil the moment for him. Hey, they all had their reasons. He himself had chosen his silver Firebird because it had a hairline crack in its oil pipe. Thus providing Lois with the ammunition to deride him for the best part of an hour over his 'expert' choice when it trailed in a sorry, blue-smoking last across the line. And providing *him* with the pleasure of listening to her gloat.

Yeah, it had been fun. There had only been one moment when things had looked set to slide.

She had dragged him back to the caf   for a celebratory coffee and the danish that had been the subject of their bet. As they'd eaten, sharing the pepperoni deep pan pizza with extra herbs and mushrooms that she'd also inveigled out of him, the subject had turned back to

their upcoming raid.

Clark had been captivated by the sparkling eyes of his partner, by the almost tangible crackle of energy dancing in their deep, mysterious brown depths as she bounced her theories and ideas back and forth across the little black-and white-checkered table like the hits in a particularly frenzied bout of tennis. She had entranced him and perhaps that had been his mistake. Perhaps he had shown too much of his admiration and attraction in his eyes as they roamed her face, watching her babble. He loved watching her babble.

She had been grinning at him across the table, as they sat conspiratorially close together, talking in hushed whispers, and then, as startlingly fast as a cloud passing over the sun, her face had changed; closed down tight, shutters slammed down. In the single beat of a heart the light in her eyes had gone out. He had watched it vanish, flicker into wariness, as clearly as though she had reached out and physically pushed him away.

She'd straightened abruptly, putting distance between them as she brushed a quick hand through her hair. Her eyes had been suddenly cool as she'd changed the subject, making some random comment about their surroundings that he didn't even hear as he felt disappointment sweep him.

And some of the light had gone out of the day. As though the onset of dusk and the cooling of the sun had found a match in his partner's mood. She had been pensive for a time as he'd struggled on alone, keeping his conversation light and carefully free of even the hint of anything personal. But by the time they'd made their way back to the Jeep she'd seemed to regain balance again, shaking off whatever had spooked her. Some of the easiness of the day had been regained and, although their conversation as night descended had been more subdued, it had, over the hours, morphed into the lazy talk that friends swapped in the small, silent hours after a long and tiring day. The kind of talk that Lois usually had to be dragged kicking and screaming or ambushed into. Meandering and cozy and peppered with gentle teasing and comfortable silences where neither felt the need to say much of anything at all. They had shared dreams and confidences, hopes and plans, and somewhere along the way in those long stretching hours, entirely without planning or intent, they had turned a corner, become more than good friends, reached a new level of understanding and intimacy.

And, perhaps...something more than that?

"Here it is!"

He glanced up at his partner's triumphant exclamation, drawn from his musing, and hurriedly dropped the tool back to the counter. He moved up alongside her, leaving the wistful turn of his thoughts behind him as he did.

"The computer?"

"Now all we have to do is find those files."

She began to root around in the disk boxes stacked neatly to one side of the expensive computer system. Clark hunted around briefly and discovered the monitor's on switch. He flicked it over and waited as

the machine hummed quietly to itself and the screen brightened to show the Tirelli 'spitting salamander' logo.

"Here, let me," he said, slipping into the high-backed chair and taking the first box from her as he focused intently on the flickering screen. "Why don't you go see if there's some kind of printer around here that we can download onto?"

"Me? Why don't you?" Lois protested his appropriation of the search.

Clark glanced at her firmly as he tapped the mouse. The screen chimed as it brought up the main access menu. "My scoop. Remember?"

"Well, gee, Clark, it's not as though I'm going to ace you out of it or anything!"

Clark raised a brow at her and she had the grace to blush. She scowled right with it though.

"I found the computer first," she pointed out.

"I've got seniority."

"Look! They're using the new MIDEX system. I know that system backwards. I could run it off in half the time it'll take - "

"It's still my scoop, Lois. You're not getting this chair."

"We've got forty minutes before the next security sweep. We don't have time to argue out one of your childish tantrums, Clark! Give me - "

"Nope."

Lois' hands gravitated to her hips in a familiar warning signal of thunderstorms gathering, which Clark studiously chose to ignore. "Clark Kent - " she gave up persuasion and common logic abruptly and went for the throat. "Get out of that chair now or I swear I'll -- "

"Won't do you any good."

Halfway to completing another blistering retort, Lois paused, as though sensing he was outmaneuvering her somewhere along the line in ways she couldn't quite fathom. He had an air about him of holding on to a trump card he just hadn't thrown into the pile yet. Her eyes narrowed on him, suspiciously. "Why not?"

"Because you're not getting in here any faster than I will."

Oh, was *that* all? Lois smiled tightly, back on sure ground. Game, set and match to Lane. Male arrogance and their reliance on their so-called 'superior' intelligence never beat her - as Kent was just about to find out. "Will too!" she declared confidently. "I told you, I know this system like the back of my -- "

"Knowing the system doesn't amount to a hill of beans, Lois," Clark said, tapping at another couple of keys as he continued to eye the screen. "You're forgetting just one..." he hit another sequence of

letters, "...tiny..." the computer blipped and he punched return, "...little detail here."

Cut off at the pass, she frowned. "Which is?"

Clark flashed her a wide grin. "I'm the one with the system's access codes." His grin became just a little smug - intolerably smug, to Lois' mind. "And I'm not sharing."

Lois stared at him for a moment, eyes turning round, her expression almost comic in its utter disbelief. Mutiny, by God! And from her partner! Her *junior* partner. Well...her almost junior partner. The partner who should, if there was any fairness in the world at all, be her junior partner. Her partner who was *going* to be her junior partner or, even better, not her partner at all, if he didn't shape up and fly right and accept that she was in charge.

Didn't he know she was the one with the experience here? The one who knew more about covert hit and run research than him and a whole platoon of Navy Seals put together? Who had simply *years* of --

"Printer?" Clark reminded gently with another smirk, interrupting her slow burn, before he returned his attention to the keyboard, dismissing her.

Lois paused, looking as though she might be trying to regroup, marshalling her ground troops for another assault.

"Time's ticking, Lois. That guard will be here soon," Clark warned her absently as he took a showy glance at his watch for effect and then clicked on another option to bring up a second menu.

Lois' lips tightened over whatever it was she'd been about to use as a challenge. Clark could feel the laser heat of her eyes burning at the back of his neck before she snarled something inarticulate and stalked off into the darkness. The stiff cast to her spine clearly sign-posted her annoyance as he turned his head briefly to track her retreat. She kept up a low, aggrieved mutter as she went.

"Two-timing...back-stabbing..." Clark heard clearly, followed progressively by, "...told Perry it'd *never* work..." and "...just wait till we're back at the Planet, that's all..." before it faded into an indecipherable growl of general complaint as Lois began to prowl around the far reaches of the garage.

Clark took another wary glance across his shoulder to ensure she was out of range and then rapidly searched the disk boxes that Lois had been ferreting through a moment earlier. Nothing. Not that he was surprised. The team bosses were almost pathologically paranoid about unsportsmanlike, industrial sabotage from other teams. They'd be unlikely to leave sensitive information lying around. And Tirelli would be guarding this material more than most - even from his own crew.

The computer bleeped and he gave it his attention long enough to key in the last of the access codes which Adam had given him. He scanned through the list of directories it produced and, finally, well hidden though they were, tracked his way to the Tirelli's private business

files.

He thought for a moment, tapping a restless finger against the keyboard. Faintly, in the background, he heard Lois curse as she barked a shin against a scatter of plastic equipment boxes in one corner of the room. The following sound was hard to place until he realized it was the rhythmic thud of her viciously kicking the offending cartons. He hid a smile, shook his head, and heard her move on.

Tirelli. He considered what he knew about the man. He'd researched his quarry carefully, even before pitching his idea at Perry. A frown gathered on his forehead and he reached to tap out a seven-letter word.

****Access denied.****

He drew in a small breath and then, keeping half of his attention on Lois' movements, let his fingers blur across the board as he tried out hundreds of possible private passwords that Tirelli might have used. He made it on the two hundred and fourth.

Houston.

The site of Tirelli's third win. And the name of his third eldest daughter.

Clark smiled smugly to himself as he began prowling through Tirelli's office files. As he'd suspected, the man had made a common mistake that seemed to haunt most every villain he'd ever encountered. He'd gone for ease of convenience over total security and linked up his computer systems to all its outlets, relying solely on the password and access codes as a guarantee of privacy. As a result, Tirelli's office system, halfway around the world, was connected to every other system he owned, both private and business, including Indycar and the nine other related corporations he had a stake in.

"Well?"

Clark started violently as Lois' impatient voice sounded just shy of his right ear, so close that her breath tickled warmly against his skin. He'd been so engrossed in what he was reading that for once she hadn't registered on his senses as she'd approached.

He turned his head slightly and discovered her leaning close at his shoulder, in that familiar pose that always had the ability to kick his heart into touch and destroy his concentration. She had her eyes on the screen, her lips moving slightly as she scanned the lines of displayed text. The scrolling blue light played across her face and flickered balefully against the sage green check of her jacket.

As he watched, she straightened to remove the jacket absently, her attention still fixed on the text. She reached out blindly to hitch it across the back of his chair and he moved reflexively to allow her room before settling back again. He knew the signs. Lois was digging in for a long haul, rolling up her metaphorical sleeves and preparing to wade in deep, just like they were back in the newsroom. She'd picked up the scent of criminal activity and was closing in for the kill.

Unbidden, his heart tripped on over into a stuttering beat against his ribs, driven by the familiar tingle of excitement and anticipation that always preceded a brainstorming session with his partner. The thrust and parry, back and forth battling, of ideas and theories never failed to thrill him, never failed to remind him that this was what he'd gotten into journalism for: the scent of blood in the water, closing in on the kill...and the privilege of watching a razor sharp intelligence that matched his own and even, in many ways, surpassed him, as it worked its way through to the truth and on to the Eureka moment that always stunned him with its wild leaps of logic and instinctive cunning.

He loved those moments, lived for those moments, she was so beautiful when she was excited and on the hunt for new prey. Stunning. Eyes shining, face flushed with the high color of triumph and satisfaction.

Lois reached out and pressed one long finger down on the keyboard, continuing to explore the scrolling lines of text and blind to her partner's rapt attention.

Clark wondered, distantly, as he watched that pulse of low burning excitement glow in her face and glitter in those adorable toffee colored eyes, if she'd look that way when she made love. All of her inhibitions abandoned, all of her emotions laying on the surface of her skin and high and bright in her eyes...the violent sparks of passion sizzling between them...

A flicker of motion caught his attention and drew it reluctantly from her face. She was unbuttoning the cuffs of her blouse. He watched, bewitched, as she rolled her sleeves to her elbows. She reached up and undid a couple of buttons at her throat for good measure, oblivious to the way his eyes followed the preoccupied, unconscious grace of her motions as though drawn by strings. The air in the garage was muggy and over-warm, and he guessed she was already starting to feel uncomfortably sticky.

Resisting the impulse to check that one out and see for himself, Clark found himself fascinated en route to that resistance by the pale triangle of skin at the base of her throat. Spellbound, he was unable to pull his eyes away from where the steady flickering throb of blood ticked lightly, beating a low, gentle pulse. It looked so soft there.

He traced the delicate, near invisible patterns of blue that feathered out across her skin. For a moment, his heart fluttered in tune with that rising and falling point of life. He wanted nothing more than to lean over and hold her close as he put his lips lightly to the velvet softness of her skin; to feel that life beating strong and slow under his lips, taste the sweet warmth of her, let the scents of her wash through him...

"What's Nomex?" Lois' curious voice yanked him from this increasingly intriguing train of thought.

"HMMMMMMM?"

Clark dragged his gaze away from the deep cleft of darkness against pale skin that those opened buttons had produced.

He followed her gaze with a low frown, chiding himself for getting distracted. He glanced at his watch. They had another twenty minutes to get what they'd come for and get out before that guard arrived, he reminded himself sternly.

He cleared his throat softly. Focus. Tirelli. Remember?

"Oh. Yeah. Um, nothing important. It's a standard fireproofed material for coveralls. All of the support crews and safety guys wear it."

"Ah." Lois nodded. "So..." she gave him a quick glance, "...find anything?"

"Yeah, um, I mean no - I haven't found anything." His gaze, entirely of its own volition and without his consent, had wandered back to that enticing view. He returned it to the screen with another frown, dampening his thoughts down firmly and fixing his attention rigidly on the glowing lines of text. "Um, I've gotten into Tirelli's private files though."

"Really? That was quick." Lois patted his shoulder gently, easily ready to forgive his earlier hijacking of her scoop now that he'd gotten results. And - though she'd be dragged naked behind a trailer truck before admitting to it - faster than she would have too. "That good old Smallville luck of yours is really jumping tonight, huh?"

"Yeah." He smiled slightly.

"So, how'd you get in?"

"Oh, you know." He shrugged airily. "He doesn't have a whole lot of imagination."

Lois snorted. "Just like every other guy I've ever known." She paused and then tightened her grip just a fraction. "No offense, partner."

He grinned as he reached out and hit the cursor, scrolling down another few paragraphs. "Maybe you just haven't let me explore my imagination to its limits," he told her and then, hearing how the words sounded, heightened in his imagination by his previously salacious thoughts, looked up on her quickly. "Uh, I mean - well, anyway breaking the password was easy," he said, flustered now and beginning to blush slightly.

Lois, engrossed in the screen again, didn't appear to notice. "Think we can get a link to Tirelli's office from here?"

"Don't see why not." He clicked the second of the options on the displayed menu, retreating into business again.

It took another five minutes to find, but finally he hit the mother lode.

"Look, hospital stats.," Lois murmured, laying the tip of one finger against the screen. "And that chemical analysis report."

Clark nodded, fingers darting over the keyboard as he hit another

sequence.

"What you doing?"

"This'll take too long to print and it'll be too much to hide if we get caught. I'm downloading Tirelli's private files onto disk. One should do it."

Lois nodded approval as he slammed a blank disk into the drive slot and set the copy program in motion. He relaxed back against his chair and twirled it slightly around to face his partner. He flashed her a grin as he laced his fingers comfortably against his ribs, settling his elbows against the chair's armrests. "Paydirt," he said softly.

Lois gave him the thumbs-up and a wide grin in return. "Pulitzer, here we come!" She glanced at the slowly filling bar displayed on the screen. "How long is that gonna take?"

Clark followed the glance. "Another six minutes. We've got plenty of time. We'll be out of here well before the next security check."

The machine hummed gently to itself and flashed an occasional light at them. After a moment or so, as they waited it out, Lois wandered idly away, curiously surveying the garage and its contents.

"Is this really worth a million bucks?" she asked, stopping in front of the shrouded car. She bent over, putting one hand on her knee to balance herself, and cautiously twitched the corner of the tarp upwards as she held it between a finger and thumb, trying to see beneath.

Clark had gone back to the screen. Turning his head to answer the query, his words stuck in his throat as he found himself staring at the intriguing view of his partner's pertly rounded backside in its tightly molded sheath of green checked tweed mix. He swallowed roughly.

"And then some," he croaked hoarsely when he found himself able to speak.

"Really?" She turned her head to view him and then straightened with a shrug. "Must really choke them up when it hits the wall," she judged.

Clark blinked and then, recovering, "Yeah. But even if it makes the finish line intact they still rebuild it practically from the chassis up before each race, so I guess it doesn't really make much difference."

"Oh?" Lois said, and he recognized from her tone that she was less than interested in the subject any more. She frowned over his shoulder at the softly humming computer. "Is that going to be finished soon?" she asked, impatiently.

Clark tapped the keyboard, nixing the screen saver, and shrugged. "Another three minutes, tops."

Lois sighed. She paced a little more. Stopping beside one of the

shelving stacks that crowded the room, she picked up a hunk of metal and examined it disinterestedly before setting it back again. She ran a slow finger across the line of the metal shelf, like a pernickety housewife searching out dust, and then blew out another soft breath and glanced around the shadowed room. Clark tracked her, fighting a small smile, recognizing the signs, and then returned his attention to the computer as she turned on her heel and came back towards him.

She perched herself on the edge of the steel trolley butted up against the side of the computer desk and sighed. She crossed her legs, a smooth motion that tried to capture Clark's attention from where it was fixed on the screen.

Lois sighed again. Her glance swept the computer. She grimaced over the screen saver, in which a cartoon mole repeatedly got hit with a mallet and squashed in a terribly amusing splatter of cartoon blood as an 'Ouch!' bubble appeared from its mouth, and then let her eyes wander aimlessly across the clutter of the trolley. She leaned an elbow on the desk's edge and stirred a finger through the scatter of paperwork, charts and documents.

She sighed for the third time in as many seconds.

Clark's eyes brightened a little with amusement as he waited for the inevitable.

"Doesn't this place have a soda machine or something?" Lois said, rubbing her hands together irritably as she lifted her head to scan the garage again.

Bingo.

Clark chuckled. And in just under forty seconds - a record.

"What?" Lois turned her head to him again with a frown. "What's so funny?" she demanded, catching his grin.

He shook his head "Sorry." The grin spread. "You're showing all the signs of withdrawal again, that's all." He glanced at her, eyes twinkling. "Just relax, Lois. I'll buy you your next fix at that all night gas station on Lexington, just as soon as we get outta here."

Lois scowled.

"Five minutes, tops," Clark added, holding up the appropriate number of fingers at her momentarily with the offer, for added emphasis.

Lois' eyes narrowed on them and then lifted to his face, primed like twin coals now. "How many times do I have to tell you, Clark, I do **not** have an addiction to caffeine."

He snorted, looking carelessly away from her challenging glare, dismissing its potency and refusing to be intimidated by it. All of which irked Lois far more than his accusation had.

"Lois, you drink more coffee than anyone I know. You could earn millions working as a taster for Nescaf  ."

"Would not! Well, I could, of course I could, if I *wanted* to," Lois amended hastily, unwilling to accept a negative scorecard on her list of abilities, even if it did mean agreeing with him.

"I just *don't* want to. I *like* coffee," she informed him with the distinct air about her of someone to whom this argument was not entirely new: a difference of opinion that may already have been fought to a tussle, three falls and a submission. Only, Lois Lane wasn't ready to submit - not by a long shot. She glanced back into the shadows for a moment and then came back to meet the amused look her partner wasn't even having the decency to attempt to hide.

"I *happen* to like coffee," she reiterated. She went for indignant, but somehow it emerged more defensively than she'd intended. She glared at the architect of that insecurity. "Is that such a crime?"

"No..." Clark shook his head.

The darkness of Lois' countenance lightened a little.

"...I just think you should be honest about why you need it, that's all."

And darkened again.

"I don't *need* it. I like it. There's a *difference*, Clark."

"Lois, I've *seen* you first thing in the morning, remember? You don't function till you have at least three cups of coffee. Anything less than that and you wander around the newsroom like an extra auditioning for a George Romero flick."

Anger, white-hot and scathing, boiled up out of Lois' thoughts, flared on her lips...and inexplicably extinguished itself. In the void it left behind it, revenge lit in her eyes as they took a moment to regard Clark with a new, sudden slyness. Lois didn't pause to analyze the dousing of that fire. It wasn't new...or even unexpected any more. Lately it just seemed that where once she would have responded exclusively to her partner's teasing with annoyance, more often than not she found herself more inclined to tease him back. She had even begun to enjoy it. It had been a confusing shift in her response to him at first and she had puzzled over it, tried to ignore it, tried to ignore him...all to no avail. Finally, she had simply come to accept that, whatever it was that had wrought that sea change in her emotions, it seemed she was stuck with it. It was simply a part of what was; part of the mysterious change a certain Kansas farmboy had managed to coax her into.

A faint smile flickered at the corner of her lips and then vanished as her gaze turned smoothly and purely to mischief. Clark, checking the computer screen as he waited her out, anticipating her response as though he was engaged in a game of chess and had taken his turn, was unaware of her change of mood. Had he seen what was glowing in her eyes just at that moment, he might have felt the distinct frisson of danger sizzle between them.

But he didn't.

He was as oblivious to what was homing in on him, bearing down on him like a Mack truck, as a blind rabbit grazing unwarily on discarded cabbage in the fast lane.

Lois paused to fix that image in her mind and then shifted her perch subtly on the trolley's edge, swiveling around to face him more squarely. She straightened imperceptibly, tightening her shoulderblades. She uncrossed her legs and then crossed them again in the opposite direction, watched Clark twitch and repeated the move just for the heck of it. Did he really think she didn't notice the effect that simple maneuver had on him? Hardly, since it had been honed and primed as a weapon by generations of women before her right back to the primordial swamps. Well...almost. She stifled a giggle as her partner's jawline tightened and then, because this had become a battle of wills, she let him off the hook. Just a little. No sense in reeling in the worm with the bass; this was a long haul campaign.

And revenge was a dish that was best served cold.

She began to trace a slow and thoughtful pattern across the top of the stacked computer disks lying on the desk beside her. She watched her fingers forming those aimless circles as though they were the most important things in the universe right then. Certainly much more important to her than her partner, who she was entirely, completely, undoubtedly oblivious to. Who might as well have been invisible for all the notice he was worthy of.

"You said I looked pretty good first thing in the morning," she said idly after a time, when she was certain that the message that he was completely inconsequential to her had worked its way through and into her partner's psyche. She kept her attention on the disks, very carefully not even glancing in his direction with the comment.

"I *said*, you looked pretty decent," Clark murmured a demurral, still watching the screen as he launched this counterstrike with barely a pause to think about it or place its reference in his memory. If Lois had been thinking straight she might have wondered over that almost instant recognition of the moment - and how easily he'd come to it - but she had other things on her mind.

"There's a *difference*, Lois."

Clark heard the restless motions of her fingers still and let her react to that for a moment before he looked away from the screen and up on her with a smile to offer the concession, "But you *do* look good..."

Lois flushed, her carefully prepared campaign abruptly lost, forgotten, as she found her gaze locked with his, found herself falling into the soft, warm affection that burned low like a banked flame in the depths of his eyes as he teased her. Reluctantly, and with surprising effort, she broke the hypnotic pull of that candid, mocha colored gaze, dropping hers. She resisted the soft shiver that tremored through her as that connection was severed. Suddenly, confusingly, she felt almost...naked. Exposed.

But a pleased smile hovered at the edge of her lips, despite her momentary discomfort, as she replayed what he'd just said in her

head. She felt the low heat in her cheeks brighten and echo itself in a newly warming glow in the center of her chest.

"...once you've had your caffeine fix," Clark continued with a slow, devastating grin.

He felt giddy and just a little reckless, with victory so almost in their grasp. Their raid had been a success; they'd gotten all the evidence they needed for a dynamite take that was going to have Perry whooping at the rooftops when they got back to the Planet. Not that he had ever doubted his source, but he'd been on too many covert raids before where the evidence hadn't fallen into his hands as easily as this had, and knowing the information to break a story was in there - somewhere - wasn't always a guarantee that it could be found.

And, aside from all that cause for celebration, Lois was impressed with the whole ball of wax. She was trying hard to make it look like she wasn't, but she was. He could tell. More than reason enough to go with the moment, kick back and enjoy...and indulge in a little teasing of his partner.

The blossoming smile on Lois' face vanished. Clark saw the fingers resting on the disk box tighten ever so slightly. There was a pause...a long, long pause...and then Lois lifted her head and Clark felt his breath clench hard and tight in his throat as he caught what was latent in the fierce and newborn gleam in her eyes.

Oh-oh.

He was in trouble.

Lois smiled. One of her brilliant, megawatt, high voltage smiles that showed just a glint of bared teeth behind the sparkle.

He was definitely in trouble.

Clark realized he was shifting uneasily in his seat and stilled the motion. He resisted the urge to swallow, but his eyes widened just a little, a reflex he couldn't control no matter how much willpower he brought to bear on the task as she leaned forward slightly, a softly swaying motion that abruptly reminded Clark of a coiled cobra, poised to strike. He blinked as a low, sibilant hissing sounded in his ears and for a moment thought his imagination had rocketed into overtime, before he realized it was simply that Lois had crossed her legs again. This time he did swallow. It caught in his throat and almost choked him until he repeated the action a desperate couple of times.

He saw Lois haul in a breath. And then she spoke - a throaty, sensual purr that he had never heard from her, a seductive murmur that dropped his lower jaw and made his heart jolt restlessly in his chest. For a wild moment he thought he knew what it felt like to have a coronary.

"HMMMMMM. Feeling brave tonight, are we, Kent?" she asked in a breathy growl and, as he blinked, startled, she leaned towards him again. "You know..." she reached out to place the tip of a finger in the center of his t-shirt and ran it slowly around the outline of the black bat displayed there, as though entirely incognizant to the fact

that it just happened to be stretched, snug and tight, across a broad and muscular male chest. "I think I kind of like that."

"You...you do?" Clark breathed, trying to ignore, as completely as she apparently was, the twitch of muscle that followed the sly, silken touch of her fingers. He frowned suspiciously. Compliments weren't usually in the game plan - at least not the kind that didn't come with strings attached. "What?"

Lois smiled. "This of course." She looked up at him as she tapped the bat emblem with this coy dissembling and Clark stifled the sudden urge to laugh at her antics.

Lois reversed direction, stroking her way back along the famous outstretched wing of the logo before retreating again. The desire to laugh deserted Clark abruptly as he drew in a hard breath and bit back the low groan that tried to escape his throat.

Her smile sharpened, and Clark found unable to make any move at all as she leaned her elbows on the monitor, a move that brought her face to within inches of his. Her eyes flickered back to follow her fingers as they reached out to trace a languid path along the line of his skin where it met the neckline of his t-shirt, then changed direction. One of them briefly and electrically traced the line of his jaw before dropping away, a nail tip etching a sharp trail down the side of his throat...

...and paused. She glanced back up, expression hooded and entirely guileless, just a hint of challenge, barely discernable, sparking in the dark of her soft, doe eyes. She arched a brow at him.

Frozen in that moment, fighting against the roughness of the breath in his chest, the dizziness swarming in his thoughts, feeling the quick stutter of his heart slam against his ribs, Clark simply stared back at her for the longest time.

Then something flickered, way down deep in his eyes.

Oh no, you don't.

He snapped out of the lust-enhanced stupor she'd wrought in him so skillfully and jerked slightly back in his chair. His shoulders tensed and he felt a faint flush of blood rush to his cheeks as he brought his gaze to bear on the screen in front of him, suddenly finding an intense interest in the little brown-coated creature dashing around on the monitor as it tried to avoid extinction. He knew how it felt. He reached out and wrapped his fingers around the mouse. He shifted it, clearing the screen and tried to focus his mind on the blur before him.

He could still smell the warm sandalwood and rose scents of Lois' perfume, like a haze on his thoughts.

He took a slow breath. And then another. He straightened his shoulders.

Okay...

Fine...

He scanned the screen, noting that the bar in the center of the screen had just about turned entirely blue. He moved the cursor over to the top of the screen and clicked on a menu. Why he had no idea, but it looked purposeful.

She'd been pushing him for months now. At first, her new aggressiveness, her inexplicable and sudden desire to introduce a new note of intimacy and danger into her teasing of him had baffled him completely. He hadn't been fool enough to think that she was hitting on him. Lois had made her position about office romances and most especially a romantic encounter with him more than clear on more than one occasion. And yet her teasing of him had suddenly taken on a blatantly provocative undertone that was disconcerting in the extreme and which he could find no explanation for.

It hadn't taken him long to put it together though. Lois' reckless flirtations with him had started a couple of days after she'd come on to him while under the influence of Miranda Newton's pheromone concoction. When he had made the connection, finally, after an evening puzzling it out in his apartment and a particularly frustrating day spent as her victim, Clark's first response had been to feel pity for his partner. Lois had had her confidence badly shaken by the experience. She was a woman who needed to be in control - of her life, of the people around her, and most especially of her sexuality. To be so out of control had disturbed her greatly. She needed reassurance and the method she had chosen to regain it, to soothe her wounded pride, had been to tease her partner to the limits of sexual frustration...and then drop him like a hot coal when she'd achieved her aim.

Proving what? That she could turn on and off her own sexuality when and as it suited her without falling into the trap of arousal? That she could tempt herself to the limits and call a halt when she chose? That she could tease *him* to distraction but resist temptation herself?

Those and a few others, no doubt. And, most of all, to prove that she was in charge.

Clark had been annoyed at being the lab rat only until he took a little more thought on it and realized just how shaken Lois was. Her flirting with him was just blatant enough to be calculated. So it wasn't hard for him to understand that she was trying less to undermine and confuse him than she was to prove to herself that she could skirt the very edges of danger, push them both to the brink and stay in control. Of him. She thought she needed to control *him*, and she needed to control him because she was afraid she could no longer control herself.

Not that she'd admit to that of course. And because she would never confess to those fears, Clark was unable to remind her that her actions had nothing to do with lack of control or her own failings, but were a chemically induced and temporary lapse of reason that would never be repeated...or able to make her believe it.

Her pride had been severely dented by the events the Planet staff still referred to obliquely as Pheromone Tuesday. He understood that - more than he suspected Lois knew. He understood how insecurity clawed at his normally supremely confident partner and how she needed to restore her own pride at the expense of his.

So, he'd been content to go along with the game and, actually, he'd found that he enjoyed the verbal sparring and sensuous flirting that she introduced into their relationship on a daily basis; the prickle of sexual tension that wove itself in the air around them like dangerous magic, and he couldn't deny that it was exciting and arousing to have Lois play the femme fatale for him. Even if it did mostly lead to frustration...and a heck of a lot of long, cold showers when he got home to his apartment of an evening. His landlord had begun to make strange faces when presenting him with his monthly bill for utilities.

And that enjoyment of this new and reckless phase in their relationship had been the biggest danger of all, though neither of them had apparently realized it until it was too late.

Somehow, things had changed between them. When, he had no idea - or how - it simply had.

Not that he would ever acknowledge it or act on that change. Whether Lois knew it or not, her actions showed a trust in him to know the limits, in his ability to judge her intent and not step across the boundaries she laid down for him, that touched him deeply and which he could never betray.

She knew that she could push him to the brink of patience and frustration without suffering the consequences. Another man might call her bluff, expect her to give up what she offered so blatantly in temptation, but not him. She knew that she was safe with him.

Sometimes that thought alone could produce a warm sensation in his chest that clenched his heart tight and made him feel such tenderness towards his partner that it overwhelmed him entirely.

How many times did she steal his heart away without even trying? And without ever knowing that she had?

The computer burped petulantly, breaking into his thoughts. He looked back at the screen and muttered a soft imprecation that shocked Lois with its mildness. He straightened in the chair, losing the easy posture of a moment earlier.

"What?" Lois straightened with him, tension stiffening her spine, teasing abruptly abandoned.

"Disk error." Clark tapped the release button and grabbed the ejected disk, tossing it carelessly to one side. "Give me another."

Lois hastily fumbled in the box and handed him the first blank disk she found. He examined it briefly and then shook his head as he shoved it into its receiving slot and began setting up the copying program from scratch.

"Clark - " Lois started, concerned.

"It's okay. We've still got time. We'll just be cutting it closer that's all." He finished tapping at the keyboard, hit enter and looked up at her with a grin. "Only disaster is you get to wait five more minutes for that caffeine fix," he told her.

Lois grimaced. "Cute, Kent. Very cute."

Clark chuckled. He reached out an absent hand and laid it briefly against her arm as he returned to a quick check of the machine's progress. "Settle down, Lois. If you're real good I might even throw in some Double Fudge Crunch Bars. Your blood sugar levels must be plummeting even as we speak."

He took back his hand and Lois lost the inclination to offer an answering retort, drawing in her breath sharply as she felt a tingle of electricity pass through her from where that passing touch lightly brushed against the curve of her breast. She flicked a quick glance at her partner. To her relief, he hadn't seemed to notice her reaction to the brief and accidental contact between them, his attention too much on the progress of the disk. She shook her head a little, irked with herself.

For pity's sake, Lois, she rebuked herself sharply. Snap out of it! You're acting like a silly little sophomore who's never been so much as kissed.

/And you have been, Lois,/ a darker, much more bitter thought added sardonic censure. /You've been kissed a lot. And by men who mostly couldn't find the time to stay around much beyond the kissing either. You remember that? Don't you? And didn't you swear you'd never let yourself get suckered in by a pair of puppy dog eyes and tight buns again?/

The thought brought on an unexpected wave of sadness, dousing her earlier pleasure abruptly.

Yes, she had. But safety had its downside. Sometimes, a small whisper within her ventured - as though embarking on a line of thought it wasn't really certain it truly wanted to explore or hold up to the light for examination - it got awfully lonely for one thing.

There was no doubting, much as she might pretend otherwise, even to herself (to herself most of all), that her life wasn't exactly panning out as she'd envisaged it would. Oh, she had her career, *that* was on a fast track to where she wanted it, certainly. In fact, she was exceeding her expectations, achieving her ambitions far faster than she'd ever hoped or expected to. Already her name was one to be reckoned with, she was respected, for her tenacity and abilities, and she had made it in a world that was genetically engineered to be predisposed against her making it at all.

But a career couldn't keep you warm at night; couldn't hold you close in the small hours of darkness or share your bed; couldn't trade a smile with you, in the bathroom mirror of an expensive hotel suite, that was so devastating it laid waste to your heart; couldn't look good enough in nothing but a towel to weaken your knees and short out the speech centers in your brain.

And the romantic that lay hidden deep in Lois Lane's heart, which was a small and cowering and buried creature at best, chained firmly in the shadows like the black sheep of the family by the hard bitten personality which drove her, wept for that loss.

Wistfully, her thoughts led her to drift back to the previous

evening. Alone and restless, she'd been out of sorts with the world and especially her partner, who had spiked her weekend plans and hadn't even had the decency to stick around so she could savage him for it.

Bored, she'd remembered the backlog of tapes amassed during the last few frantic weeks of a frenetic workload. She hadn't been able to find time to watch her favorite soap opera in what seemed like months. Not that she was exactly in the mood, she'd told herself grumpily, even as she'd dragged the tapes out of the depths of the TV cupboard, where they'd been thrown into hiding like some guilty secret.

When last she'd left them, Zak Powers and vivacious banker's daughter, Autumn Bell, had gotten tangled up with bank robbers and were languishing in the safety deposit vault. Autumn had had - inexplicable - plans to dig a tunnel out. With what, Lois couldn't fathom. She had snorted her opinion of the plan. The girl was a flake, and, unless she had abilities beyond that of power shopping and batting her eyelashes at passing hunks of bronzed male flesh or was hiding a foldaway jackhammer somewhere in that skintight leather mini, she was a pretty dumb flake at that.

It hadn't really mattered, because Zak, it seemed, had altogether different plans anyway, taking advantage of the situation to simply force the woman he'd sparred with and yelled at and traded insults with for the best part of a month up against the cold steel wall behind her. Where he'd proceeded to kiss her so thoroughly and for so long and with complete disregard for their preciousy depleting quota of air that, watching, Lois had begun to feel uncomfortably like a voyeur.

By the time a concerned security squad led by her distraught father had cut through the vault door, Zak and Autumn had not only consummated their new found love, but Zak had produced an emerald solitaire that he apparently kept in his jeans pocket for just such an occasion and the happy couple had decided on a June wedding.

And Lois had happily snuffled her way through three boxes of Kleenex, feeling much more relaxed.

Once she'd recovered, switching off the VCR and snuggling her way contentedly into the depths of her comforter, Lois had found herself thinking, sleepily, of the time when Superman had rescued her from a similar predicament. Well, from a slow, suffocating death in a bank vault anyway. Lois Lane, the slightly twisted thought pricked at her, was never likely to be rescued from the panting, desire soaked embrace of a Viking God like Zak Powers. Things like that just didn't happen to the World's Finest Investigative Reporter.

That truth had burst the cocoon of romantic melodrama and fantasy in which she'd wrapped herself carefully for sleep. Shying away from the depressive mood it was like to bring on, Lois had forced her thoughts onto a much more welcoming memory. She remembered, bright and shining in her mind's eye, how Superman - who beat Viking Gods and male model TV actors with precisely coiffured hairstyles into a cocked hat anyway - had held her when he'd rescued her.

The memory had unspooled in her head, precisely as it had on countless occasions before and sent her off on a fantasy every bit as

implausible as anything the writers of The Ivory Tower could ever have dreamed up. Eventually, it had served its useful purpose, lulling her into warm, blissful drowsiness.

Just before she drifted into sleep however, she'd startled herself with the realization that the players in her fantasy had shifted; that it was Clark who held her in his arms not her superhero. Clark who kissed her until her world dissolved and her heart galloped dizzily in her chest; who held her tight as though he never wanted to let her go again; whose face had been so filled with fear for her as he'd burst into her prison and so full of tenderness and relief when he found her safe.

Who cared.

Who loved her.

And - as though conjured up by the nemesis of an imagination unable to fully recognize the truth of that change, unable to fully admit to its significance - in her mind's eye the walls of the vault burst inwards and Superman arrived in a loop of time, over and over, to rescue her from her own desires and her partner's embrace.

Sometimes - she'd found herself thinking muzzily before the thick, snug blanket of sleep smothered her for the night - Superman could be a real party pooper.

But in the morning her drowsing fantasies had been mostly forgotten. And if hazily remembered, only Superman survived in her memory.

Suddenly recalling them now, Lois felt a sharp prickle of dismay trace her spine.

Unwelcome fantasies and schoolgirl dreams. Was that what her social life had become? When *was* the last time she had gone on a date? She frowned.

/Actually, Lois, when was the last time anyone even *asked* you out on a date? Or paid you a compliment that didn't have strings attached? Or...bought you flowers? Or...kissed you?/

Clark kissed me.

/Oh yeah, sure, that's right! The last time a man kissed you, the last time you felt your heart race, was because he was sure your cover was about to be blown on assignment. Gee, be still my heart!//

And before that?

She couldn't remember.

Of course, there had been the plane...

Her tormentor snorted, leaping on the tentative thought with unfair glee. /Now there's a romantic fantasy to give a girl palpitations! Two seconds to being tossed into oblivion you use your partner as a diversion and all the time you're thinking about a certain superhero

in blue and how you hope he's gonna get you out of this one before you go splat! So, tell me, Lois...do the words 'get a life' mean anything to you?/

Lois scowled. Okay, okay...so her life wasn't exactly the most normal a girl could lead. So, what was normal anyway?

/Usually, getting kissed by a man without the risk of imminent death being on the agenda, for one. Talking of which...you were about to remember...?/

...when she had last kissed a man purely for the pleasure of it. Right. Well, that was easy, it had been...

Um, well no. Jerry had been a source and that peck on the cheek had been nothing more than sisterly thanks for risking his job to get her that ambulance crew report.

Well, what about...?

No, not him either.

Rich Spence?

/The accountant?! He confessed to being *gay* right afterwards, Lois!/
/

Lois shrugged off the faint, mocking laughter in her head, irked now.

Lex Luthor. There had been Lex.

The voice was silent.

She sighed, recognizing its disapproval. Yes, well, Lex was...a special case. Most of their 'dates' had been...working discussions. Except...well she didn't *usually* accept dinner dates or invitations to spend the evening from her other sources or interviewees. And Lex had certainly made no secret of the fact that he was interested in her more than as a journalist. In fact, he'd made it pretty clear he wasn't interested in her journalistic abilities at all.

A fact that still rankled, no matter how charmingly he brushed aside her achievements.

She flushed slightly, remembering Clark's accusations about her interest in Lex Luthor and felt the confusion thoughts of the man always generated in her rise like dark bubbles in her chest. She just didn't know where he fit into her life. Or her emotions. And that irked her most of all. He was an enigma. Like Superman. Or...maybe not.

Yes, maybe Lex was better kept out of the equation.

Which left...well...well, whoever he'd been, it certainly hadn't been *that* long since he'd been there!

Had it?

Oh, who cared anyway?

I mean, geez, it's not as if kissing a man's the most important thing in the world! Is it?

Was it?

She sighed heavily, lost in the disappointment of her musing.

Clark glanced up on her from the screen with a frown. "You okay?"

"Huh?" Lois blinked, brought back to the present with a jolt. A slow, heavy rush of color took hold on her cheeks as she found herself staring into the same darkly molten and adorable eyes that had haunted her dreams of the previous night.

"Lois? Are you all right?"

"Uh...yeah. I was just...I mean I was thinking that..."

The high color in her face grew brighter as she remembered her fantasies of the previous evening...and who had figured in both of them so strongly. Despite herself, she found herself wondering, as she stared into the curious and concerned face of her partner, just what it would be like to surrender to the moment; to live out her secret fantasies and the soap opera plots that filled her lonely nights.

She blinked and then, the moment broken, almost giggled as she was enveloped by the image of a Cro-Magnon Clark, dressed in bearskins, dragging her for a dark corner of the garage, ignoring her protests, tugging her close and kissing her - ravishing her - with ruthless, exciting caresses and --

" -- is it getting hot in here?" Lois finished desperately, glancing around her as the image became less amusing and ludicrous and began to linger as something she didn't want to think about at all. She slid from the trolley to her feet. "You know I could *really* do with that soda," she said, distractedly.

Clark rose to stand with her. "You're looking a little flushed," he said, sounding concerned. "Here, why don't you - " He indicated the chair behind him as Lois looked up at him, looming close beside her in the shadows.

He was so tall. When'd he get to be so tall.....

/...and broad...and muscular...and absolutely drop dead --- /

...she found herself thinking ludicrously as he put a hand to her arm and began to guide her gently towards the vacated chair.

In a daze, Lois let herself be drawn towards him, her skin prickling, her heart thudding painfully. "Lois?" she heard him ask again and there was an anxious note in his voice now. "I really think you should -- "

He paused, lifting his head sharply, face blanking out in the blink of an eye.

"What?"

Clark ignored the question and his partner's curious look. His fingers tightened abruptly around her arm, as he glanced quickly around the shadowed garage.

"Clark - ?"

Her second attempt at a question exploded in a startled rush of air as he hauled her around, practically jerked her from her feet, and all but dragged her after him as he headed for the rear wall and a stack of open cast metal shelving standing parallel to it.

With a small squawk of surprise, Lois pivoted reflexively on one heel, left with nothing else to do but move with him or lose balance, and found herself being yanked unceremoniously in her partner's wake at a speed just roughly shy of hustle, trying desperately to match his long-legged stride.

"Clark!"

He ignored her splutter of indignant protest and her furious attempts to wrench herself free of his tight grip as he ducked around the edge of the floor to ceiling mounted stack. The shelves and the scatter of plastic storage cartons piled haphazardly against the wall formed a narrow sliver of an alcove between them, wreathed deep in shadow. An imperfect place for concealment, but all he had.

"Clark! Let - "

He hauled his still struggling partner around its edge and pushed her firmly into the furthest corner, where those shadows were darkest. Lois tore herself free of him in the same instant that he shoved her back, aided more than a little by the fact that Clark was now prepared to let her go. Though she failed - or just plain refused - to acknowledge that.

" - go!" she finished, somewhat redundantly. She glared at him as she rubbed balefully at her arm. "Just what the hell d'you think you're - ?"

"Sssshhhh!" he hissed over his shoulder at her, before dismissing her again as he turned away to lean up against the edge of the stack and peer cautiously around it. "They're coming this way."

Lois wasn't listening. She stared at the muscular back filling the space in front of her in disbelief. Bad enough he'd started hauling her around like a sack of...well, whatever disgusting thing they hauled around in sacks back at the farm, but now he was ignoring her too? *Ignoring* her! How dare he?!

If she hadn't been so downright mad enough to spit she might have considered the irony of her anger. Fantasy, it seemed, was fine when it remained just that, but reality was something else again, and Lois Lane wasn't going to put up with some *man* manhandling her all over the place without putting up a fight! Despite the fact that she'd been pining for her steady, calm and controlled partner to show a little caveman machismo as wistfully and absurdly as any repressed Victorian maiden only moments before.

She growled an indecipherable curse and stalked determinedly past him for the garage.

Or at least she tried to. Warned by the whisper of motion at his back, Clark foiled her escape attempt neatly and firmly by the simple tactic of grabbing her as she came level with him. He pushed her back into the corner he'd put her in just moments before with an insultingly absent hand and barely a flicker of a glance in her direction as he maintained his intent watch on the garage.

He heard her startled oooof of breath and grimaced as he went back to his study of the shadows. He shifted his position to prevent any further rebellion.

Furious now, and frustrated, as he blockaded her by sheer bulk alone, filling the narrow space in front of her, Lois took the only other option available to register her protest. She couldn't scream, she couldn't yell - pure, unadulterated fury had robbed her of the breath for those, sticking it tight like hot, molten steel in her throat.

Clark sighed as he felt her small fist pound its way against the broad expanse of his back. "Lois!"

"What the hell are you playing at, Kent?" she recovered enough to spit the question at him, "That hur -- mmmmphhh!"

Turning on her with a muffled curse, Clark stifled that enraged screech with a heavy hand clapped impulsively against her mouth. He snaked an arm around her and jerked her close as he twisted them around, imprisoning her beating fists effectively against his chest while pinning her into the corner. Pressed up tight between his body and the wall left her little room to continue her wild, instinctive struggles.

At least, that was the theory. In reality, he found himself with an armful of spitting, clawing hellcat. Lois, clenched tight in his embrace to the point where she shouldn't have been able to spit and claw at all, fought him ferociously, incensed at such cavalier treatment.

"Lois!" Clark protested in an urgent whisper, but she ignored him. He tightened his grip, just a little anxiously. Lord knew, he didn't want to risk hurting her any, but she was going to give them away with this!

Lois quite obviously had no such inhibitions. Her flailing foot caught him good against one shin and he winced. Not because it had hurt, but as he considered just what he was going to have to put up with when he released her. His hold on her tightened another notch reflexively with the thought and to his dismay she slumped against him all at once, going suddenly limp in his embrace.

He glanced down at her worriedly - he hadn't been holding on to her *that* tightly - and then with eyes narrowing just a touch suspiciously as he picked up a healthy and galloping heartbeat. Was this a branded Lois Lane ploy to get him to let her go? But her eyes, as she lifted her head abruptly from where it had cradled itself against his shoulder, still blazed with cold fire as they stared up

into his above the gag of his fingers.

That furious gaze held his for the briefest of instants and then darted away as his own eyes formed a question.

To the edge of the stack.

With a faint sigh of relief, Clark realized that she'd finally picked up on what he'd heard long before her: the soft, tuneless whistle from outside the garage. Her eyes came back to fix, hot and wary, on his. But her outrage was muted somewhat, in among the sudden, cold clarity of common sense.

Reassured that she understood the need for caution, that she wasn't going to make any sudden moves - or beat the shinola out of him - Clark took his hand cautiously from his partner's mouth.

Lois swallowed roughly, but stood where she was, still and silent now, except for the breath hitching hard in her chest, a legacy of her exertions. The tension in Clark's muscles uncoiled a little as he relaxed and let her go a little more. Suddenly aware of the too tight press of their bodies, now that the risk of her betraying them had passed, he flushed a little and eased back a step. At least as far as he was able in the suffocatingly claustrophobic space - which, regrettably, wasn't much.

Lois' dark gaze promised retribution - just as soon as they were out of these woods - and that was enough to distract him from the distressingly pleasant touch of her body on his. He sighed a little in the shadows.

Voices rose, muffled, from outwith the building. Putting his miserable thoughts of what revenge his partner might inflict on him to the back of his mind, Clark reviewed their situation.

The metal stack separating them from the rest of the garage was filled with boxes to waist height, forming a solid barrier. But, above that line, there were gaps among the scattered objects stored on the open cast shelves.

He glanced down quickly at Lois, calculating. The dark green blouse she wore would blend into the deep pocket of shadow in which they stood and even the silver threads which formed its subtle shading into narrow stripes would be unlikely to pick up the beam of a flashlight if it was turned their way. She was okay.

His own clothes would probably absorb the light. The jeans were unlikely to be seen and the t-shirt was black...his eyes widened a touch in realization and he ducked his head...except for the stupid, *fluorescent* logo centered on his chest which was going to ape the very beacon it was supposed to represent if that torch swept their position. The dumb thing was glowing in the dark!

The door to the garage squealed behind him as it was pushed open. Clark groaned as he realized he had no choice but to use Lois as a shield. Throwing up mental hands and a prayer for salvation for good measure, he stepped back hastily, throwing his arms around his partner and pressing up tight against her again in the narrow space as he presented his back to the open shelves. Anticipating another fight, he tightened his grip around her, turning his head to find her

ear.

"Batman!" he muttered sharply.

Trapped once more in his embrace, Lois froze. Clark could sense rather than see the expression of complete confusion cross her face and imagined that her jaw might have dropped slightly. He could hear the wheel cogs roll in her head as she wondered whether her undoubtedly kooky partner had finally flipped over completely and was now working entirely out in left field.

He could feel the suddenly thunderous beat of her heart against his chest and the roughness of her breath against his skin, the tense set of her body held against his own.

He could also feel the exact, precise moment when she put it together and realized what he meant.

"Oh..." Her soft voice tickled from where she was pressed into the side of his neck. He felt her relax a little further into him and his own muscles loosened with relief.

"Close your eyes," he whispered, turning his head slightly and breathing the words against her hair. "Catch the light," he added absently, distracted for an instant. Her hair - it smelled so good; felt so soft against his cheek, like...

Lois stiffened abruptly, her sharp retort dragging him from new born fantasies as he gave in to the temptation to nuzzle just a little closer to that cushion of fragrant silk and softly inhale its scent.

"I *know* that, Kent! Don't try telling *me* how to hide out from security! I've been doing this for -- "

The annoyed words broke off with an almost audible click of her teeth as the security guard stomped noisily into the garage. Unable to move his head to view her, Clark simply hoped that he hadn't irritated her enough that she'd forget to take the advice. Since there was no way for him to tell, he sighed slightly and let it go, hoping for the best.

And then he felt her drop her face into his shoulder, snuggling into the hollow of his neck, before she stilled again. He closed his eyes, letting his mind go blank.

They stayed within the tense circle of their forced embrace, only the thundering beat of his heart as it pounded in his ears breaking the silence around him. Lois had apparently decided to give in to the inevitable and lay still against his chest. Her hands, clenched into fists, were trapped between the press of their bodies. Clark could feel every hitch of her breath, rapid against the side of his neck, brushing his skin with soft heat. Every faint move of her curves pressed against him as her breasts rose and fell. The scent of her surrounded him.

To his dismay, he felt his body begin to respond, in that age old, primal way, to holding a beautiful, soft and warm bundle of female curves in his arms and close and tight against him. Slightly flushed now, he closed his eyes more tightly and sent out a quick, mental

plea for Lois to fail to notice with him. It was a forlorn hope, he was sure. Clark thought he might just die right there where he stood.

He tried to ease himself surreptitiously a little away from the body pressed to his own, without seeming to be doing so. Some hope. Lois' fisted grip on the front of his t-shirt tightened convulsively, pinning him in place, as though afraid he was about to give them away with his restless motion and determined to prevent him. He gave in, ducking his head lower as he heard the guard muttering in the shadows behind him. He pressed his cheek a little closer against the taut line of her jaw.

They stayed that way a time, their breath mingling, their hearts beating in sync; Clark began to wonder what it would be like to stay that way forever.

Lois shifted minutely, startling him out of his musing. He felt her mouth brush lightly against the lobe of his ear. Surprised, he tensed, his breath sticking in his throat, his heart suddenly leaping to join it, and then heard her soft murmur, "Computer..."

Huh? It wasn't what he'd been expecting her to say. He made a slight grimace, berating himself for an idiot. And just what *had* he expected her to say? Whispered words of endearment or passion in the dark of a stinking, oil-soaked garage, while they waited to be discovered and hauled off to the nearest police precinct and slapped with a trespassing citation? Get real, Kent!

Still... 'computer'? What was that supposed to mean? *That* was out of whack enough to make no sense at -- ohmiGod...the *computer*!

Even as his mind jolted with the realization, he heard the guard, just feet away, yell out, "Hey, Mike! Mikey!"

"What?" a new voice hollered back from outside.

"They got a machine in here running up a storm. Figure they forgot it when they left? You think I should like...maybe...switch it off?"

There was a pause. Then, Mike's nonchalant voice came back, "Nah, best just leave it ticking. You screw up some calcs there'll be hell to pay. It won't do no damage. Sometimes they run tests through the night. Best just leave be."

"Oh. Okay."

"You through in there?" Mike added, a touch of impatience bleeding into his voice now. "Come on, buddy, it's gittin' cold enough to freeze a monkey's butt out here! And Al's holding a sweet hand of cards and fifty bucks of my money back at the trailer! Haul it outta there, will ya?!"

"Yeah, yeah..." the guard muttered, disgruntled.

Clark held his breath as he heard the man make a half-hearted inspection of the workbench. He risked turning his head a little and watched as the guard swept his flashlight through the scatter of tools and then over the shrouded vehicle. He turned hastily away,

burying his face deeper into Lois' hair as the light turned in their direction.

Keeping his mind on what was happening behind him was impossible though; increasingly, his partner's presence distracted him. He was disturbingly aware of her soft curves pressed warm and yielding against him, of the faint cinnamon scent of her skin. Her hair tickled at the hollow of his throat, driving him crazy. He shifted uneasily, throwing another quick glance across his shoulder and then looked back down on Lois with a frown.

Seemingly more able than he had been to keep her mind firmly on the immediate business to hand (a fact that sparked a small and illogical disappointment in him) she was oblivious to him, listening intently to the guard's restless shifting. Her eyes were pools of light in the shadowed dark of the alcove. From the window high above them, a soft spill of moonlight trailed glints in the smooth darkness of her hair. His eyes settled on that play of light and shadow, mesmerized all at once.

The bang of the garage door broke into his reverie and he turned his head to follow his partner as she pulled clear of him, stepping out of his arms to creep cautiously towards the edge of the stack.

Judging the coast to be clear she gave him a backward glance across one shoulder. "Did you see that?" she demanded, tossing out a hand in the general direction of the garage proper before she set it and its companion squarely on her hips.

"What happened to regular, timed patrols? You know the guys who run this place ought to check up on that," she complained; an indignant whisper that would have amused Clark greatly had he been paying attention, completely overlooking the fact as it did that it was purely the laxity of the guards that had saved them from discovery.

"We'd better get out of here," she added. "Before they decide to - "

She glanced back, surprised, as Clark, who hadn't been listening in the slightest, reached out and put a hand against her arm to tug her gently back toward him.

"Clark?" she said, puzzled as she looked up into his distant face with a frown and then, as he stood there, staring at her, "Hey, Earth to - "

He kissed her. He didn't think about it, didn't roll it over in his mind, didn't consider the million and one reasons why he shouldn't or the implications if he did. He just did. He put up his hands to frame those delicately defined cheekbones and leaned in to press his lips firmly to the sweetly pliable heat of hers.

If she had struggled, if she had fought him - if only for the briefest instant - he would have let her go. But she didn't. She melted into his arms, melded her body to his, her lips parting invitingly and without question beneath his own.

He had kissed her before, explored her before, but this wasn't the

same; it wasn't the same thing at all. It was real, for one thing, something he couldn't pass off as a ruse on her part or an alibi on his, that he couldn't defend or deny as anything other than what it was - a pure and honest expression of his feelings for her. It was wonderfully, electrically, exhilaratingly real. And without distractions, without pretense or artifice, he put his heart and soul and everything he had to give her into that wild and breathless plundering of her lips. Lois wound her arms tight around his neck as she leaned further into the kiss, giving him back everything she had in response, without reserve, her lips frantic and restless on his. Her fingers tangled wildly in his hair as he dragged her up close and wrapped his arms tight around her, responding to the submission of her body against his, imprisoning her harder against the muscled planes of his body...and him against the soft and thrilling curves of hers.

It was an entrapment that Clark had neither the intention nor desire to escape.

Dimly, part of him found itself astonished by that surrender, by her passion. Another, more immediate and lustful part of him took advantage of it.

And then Lois pushed violently at his chest to free herself, tearing herself away from him with a sound that was halfway between a whimper and a sob. She staggered back against the shelves, her eyes wide and chased with shadows too swift and dark to easily define.

Clark, lost in a blissful haze, jolted out of it a second later, startled by that abrupt and sudden loss of her warmth pressed against him. He stared at her, backed up against the stack as though seeking its protection. Her fingers, trembling visibly, placed themselves tight over her mouth and he saw the beginnings of tears in the deep, velvet-dark eyes that he adored.

And, suddenly, all at once, in a terrible, terrifying flash of illumination, he realized what he'd done, realized he'd destroyed everything. Reality crashed in on him like a wave, hit him like bile rising in the back of his throat.

"No," he started. "No...Lois..." and neither of them missed the pleading note in his voice.

Lois shook her head violently and jerked free of the shelves she was leaning against with a soft, dismayed moan, fumbling her way past him in the shadows, jerking her arm free as he reached out automatically to stop her - and he let the hand fall; let her go.

"Lois!"

"We...we have to get going," she mumbled frantically as she headed for the door at a walk fast enough to almost become a run; a headlong dash for freedom and clear air. She needed air! Her head was pounding in time with her heart, fast and furious, and she felt dizzy and overwhelmed and fighting back the flood of tears that was knitting her chest tight, making her breath hurt. She had to get out of there. She had to get away from him!

Lois Lane had never run from any man...but she was doing it now. She avoided his gaze as she crossed hastily to the computer, feeling her

heart thud heavily against her breast and thunder in her ears as she strained to pinpoint him in the darkness behind her. Waiting for the inevitable footsteps that would mean he was following, for the touch of his hand against her shoulder that would prevent her leaving, for the sound of his voice that would freeze her in place; for the touch and scent and sound of him that would destroy her.

She ejected the disk on the second try, cursing viciously as her trembling fingers fumbled at it and finally slamming her palm against the button hard enough that for a moment the aftershock was enough to make her think she'd broken at least some of her fingers. The throb of pain in her hand focused her attention though and she almost welcomed it as she yanked the disk free of its slot and stuffed it into her purse. She headed for the garage door at a headlong clip and without so much as a glance in the direction of her partner.

Behind her, Clark closed his eyes briefly, and then headed after her, berating himself for an idiot. There were a thousand apologies already rising to his lips, a hundred explanations for his inexcusable behavior running through his head - all of them wildly implausible and none of them likely to be believed or cut any ice with his partner - and all of them were instantly forgotten as he watched Lois tug at the door.

Nothing happened.

Lois yanked harder, then reversed tactics, leaning into the plate metal to shove at it and even kicking at it after a moment. "What's wrong with it?" she muttered and he could hear a desperation beneath the angry note in her voice that he realized had nothing to do with the stubborn door; desperation and...panic; she wanted out, she wanted to get away from him. He put out a hand, resting it on her shoulder.

"Lois - " he started gently and winced as she jerked back, away from his touch, ramming the door with her shoulder again, refusing to look at him. He resisted the temptation to point out that the door opened inward and that pushing against it wasn't going to get her any further than tugging at it had. He didn't think she'd welcome the advice.

"We've got to get *out* of here, Clark!"

He hesitated. "Lois, it's okay - "

"No! No, it's *not* okay!" She gave up on the door and turned on him with the cry. "How can it be okay?! How can it ever be okay ag -- ?!" she bit off the strangled protest, shaking her head fiercely, and then stalked away from him.

He watched that stiff shouldered march, saw the tension in her spine as she folded her arms tight and defensive under her breasts and his heart ached to find some way of reassuring her. To tell her -

Tell her what? That he'd never do something so reckless again? That he'd keep his hands to himself? That nothing had changed between them and that they hadn't crossed a line that changed everything between them forever?

All of it lies.

Promises he couldn't keep.

Lois swiped a rough hand briefly across one cheek. She covered her face with that hand momentarily, dropping her head slightly into her palm, despair evident in every slumped and defeated line of her. Watching her twisted Clark's heart in his chest. And then she seemed to recover poise, just when he thought she would break down completely. She turned sharply to face him again.

"We're locked in," she said. Her voice shook a little, beneath the steady calm she inflicted on it.

Clark sighed. "Yes," he agreed simply. "We are."

Lois began to pace the small circle of uncluttered space around the cloth- draped car in the center of the garage. She moved restlessly across the concrete floor in what had become a familiar circuit. To glare up at the window, pull heavily at the door, and come back around the car to stand and scour her hapless partner with a brief, ferocious glance, before she set off on another round.

She'd been doing that for some time. And it looked like she'd be doing it for some time to come, too. Certainly, she was showing no inclination to give it up.

Clark sat on a nearby oil drum, chin propped in his hand, and watched her in silence as she stalked that circuit again, as she skirted the car, as she ran her hands over the frame of the garage door for what seemed the hundredth time.

Clark had no idea what she was searching for. She'd been over every inch of that steel encased frame - and then some - there was unlikely to be anything she'd missed. Anyway, whatever it was she was looking for, she didn't seem to be finding it any.

He could have pointed this out to her from the outset and saved her some time. It had taken *him* all of ten seconds to discover that the garage door was a smooth, seamless sheet of pre-formed steel - and he hadn't needed his powers to do it; although a swift, passing scan had confirmed his suspicions.

The door fit flush into its surrounding frame. It was clear that egress was usually obtained through the door as a whole, which was designed to flip up and over, rolling back into the ceiling, just like any domestic, garage design. The door through which they'd entered the garage earlier was merely an oblong cut into the square, a secondary source of entrance when the main door was pulled down and closed overnight. Locked from the outside, as the guard had done when he'd left, it was impossible to unlock from within.

Forcing the lock would have been the work of a moment, but there was no way he was going to do it without alerting his suspicious partner to the fact that it had taken a darned sight more than normal human strength to do it. He'd have to punch a hole in the area surrounding the lock at the very least, or mangle the doorframe or handle into an unrecognizable lump of twisted metal.

And maybe that wasn't altogether a bad thing, he thought, taking another glance at Lois. In her current mood, if she got out of here she was going to take off who knew where and he wasn't at all sure that even their story was going to keep her with him long enough for him to get the chance to put things right. Trapped as they were, she at least had no other choice but to listen to him and he had some small chance of making her understand. When she calmed down anyway. Clark grimaced. When he worked up the nerve to try talking to her.

Lois thumped a frustrated fist against the door's solid metal frame, drawing him out of his morose thoughts and making him wince. He had the feeling the door wasn't the only thing she was looking to punch out. Lois' swift, poisonous glower in his direction bore out the theory. She jerked her eyes away again and then set off in another round of restless pacing.

Clark sighed.

After a moment or so she switched tactics, giving up her frequent assaults on the door and restricting herself to prowling up and down the length of the garage, muttering under her breath.

Finally, she let him have it. Despite himself, Clark was impressed by her focus. It had taken her a little over an hour to get around to acknowledging that he was still on the same planet as she was, that he even existed at all, with anything more than those incendiary glances. She certainly hadn't favored him with any conversation.

"What are we just *sitting* here for?" she demanded, apparently disgusted with his surrender to the inevitable, as she propped to a sharp halt directly in front of him and set her hands to her hips in a classic confrontational pose. Clark shrugged, raising his head from its perch on his palm to look at her evenly. "Because we have a window that won't open and anyway is too small to get through even if it did, a door that's locked, and no other way out?" he suggested.

Lois rolled her eyes.

A small tick of irritation bled into her partner's tone as he added, a touch more caustically, "I don't know, Lois, why *are* we just sitting around? I mean, if you've got any ideas for getting out of here, I'm open to hearing them."

Lois scowled. "You know I don't," she muttered a reluctant confession. A light brightened in her face. "I could call Superman -"

"I don't think that's a good idea, Lois. I mean, we're not in any real danger here, are we? It's not like it's an emergency. And he'd be damaging property -"

" - belonging to a gangster!"

"Tirelli's not a gangster. He's a criminal, but not a gangster. And that still doesn't entitle Superman to go punching holes in his garage."

"Says you."

"I'm sure Superman would agree. And anyway, the garage doesn't even belong to Tirelli. It's the property of the race track administration and *they're* not gangsters. Or criminals. Well," he grimaced, "if you discount the markup on the pizza in that caf  anyway. Any other ideas?"

Lois paused, then shrugged peevishly.

"Then why don't you just rest up and save your strength for when we think of something," he suggested mildly. He leaned up against the shelves beside the drum he was using as a makeshift seat, setting his shoulder to the metal frame with all the air of settling himself in for a long haul.

Lois threw him a disgusted look that would have melted steel - almost - and took to pacing up and down the narrow corridor between the scatter of crates and drums again, spitting venom beneath her breath. Clark knew that she hadn't really intended him to hear what she was saying, but, since he could, what she *was* saying made his ears burn. He hadn't even suspected that his partner *knew* language like that, let alone used it. There were words in there he wasn't entirely sure he knew the meaning of and certainly would never have imagined learning from her.

He sighed heavily and straightened up again to lean his elbows on his knees and follow her stalking back and forth.

"Lois, you're starting to give me a complex," he said finally. She glanced at him and he shrugged. "Is it really so bad you have to spend a couple of hours alone - here - with me?"

She gazed at him frostily and he flushed slightly. Despite it and the answering thought that sizzled in both their minds so obviously that it found an echo in the chill and frigid air between them, he added softly, "I'm not going to touch you again, you know."

He was as surprised as she clearly was by that last. He hadn't meant to allude to anything that had happened between them earlier. He wasn't that much of a fool. The safe plan was to cool her down first and let some time settle between them before he even attempted to apologize, let alone make her listen to him.

But, honestly, he was growing just a little irked by now of her freezing him out. Okay, so he shouldn't have kissed her like that. He shouldn't have kissed her at all, his conscience abraded him sternly, and whether he had done it well or otherwise was hardly the point. Okay, he conceded irritably, he shouldn't have kissed her at all: no argument there. But it *had* just been a kiss. Between two *consenting* adults, let's not forget. (And, oh boy, had she consented!) He hadn't exactly leapt on her and wrestled her to the ground for pity's sake!

Lois had come to an abrupt halt. She folded her arms and, studiously ignoring the reference to what had happened between them, refusing to acknowledge it and keeping herself firmly focused on business, retorted, "In case you haven't noticed, Clark, we're trapped in here. If we don't find a way out -- "

"No, wait, don't tell me..." Clark held up an interrupting hand. "I know - you'll turn into a pumpkin. Oh no, hang on," he checked his watch briefly and shook his head, "no that's not it. It's after midnight already. Guess again, huh? Lois," he sighed as her face clenched against the mockery, regretting it almost instantly as he appealed more levelly, "it's no big deal. Someone will come along to let us out eventually."

"One of the guards, probably," Lois reminded him, caustically.

"Well, yeah."

"So, doesn't the little fact that we're carrying stolen computer data worry you just ever so slightly about this scenario?"

"Not really. We'll think of something to explain why we're in here without them getting suspicious enough to search us or hand us over to the police. Okay, *you'll* think of something," he amended easily as she hitched a brow at him. "You always do."

Lois pondered that. Her partner's casual faith in her abilities to talk them out of trouble wasn't exactly what she'd had in mind and was slightly disconcerting, but...well, it was rather flattering too, and he was right of course; there was that. She looked back at Clark, unable to decipher his expression clearly in the dim light of the garage.

"Okay. Point taken," she said finally, a little mollified despite herself by the compliment. She sighed and glanced across her shoulder at the door. "They don't exactly seem like the most dedicated security force on the planet anyway. It should be a piece of cake to run rings round them."

Clark wasn't too sure about that, but he could only agree with her opinion of the professionalism of security around the track. They had anticipated having to risk their hiding place a second time, or give themselves up, when the next security sweep rolled around. The former option had sent thrills of panic and anticipation through Clark in equal measure to the point where he'd considered that giving themselves up just might be the safer prospect. What Lois had thought, he had no idea, although he could hazard a fair bet that it hadn't been entirely Clark-friendly...or G-rated. In any event, it was a threat that had been made moot when they weren't disturbed.

It had been over an hour now and there'd been no sign of another patrol. Finally curious, Clark had surreptitiously swept the area around the garage and discovered 'the most dedicated security force on the Planet' as their parent company claimed in its advertising, engaged in a raucous game of poker in one of the staff trailers. They looked like they were settled in for the evening too. Beer and cheap whiskey were flowing like wine. So much for high tech protection: looked like the FIA could do with looking for a protection force just a tad more reliable around here.

Of course, that unreliability simply made their predicament all the more dangerous. Without sure knowledge of the security team's patterns they could be caught unawares before they had a chance to hide. At least, that was how Lois saw it. And Clark could hardly put

her at ease by telling her that while it may well have been a problem for others, it certainly wasn't for them. He'd hear anyone approaching long before they made it to the garage.

"So..." Lois was watching him, eyes cool and challenging. A new, laser clarity entered her voice. "What do you suggest we do for the rest of the morning? While we wait to be found, I mean?"

Clark was silent for a moment. He wasn't incognizant to the hidden undertone in the question. It was a test; there was no doubt about it.

Through the shadows, Lois had the strong impression that he was studying her intently and the idea made her nervous. Very nervous. Still, she wasn't about to back down. Bravado was about all she had left to bargain with for her self-esteem, which had taken a beating with her panicked flight - or at least her attempt to it - of earlier. The memory made her flush with chagrin. How could she have let him get under her skin so badly? Let him fluster her like that?

Let him kiss her?

"I have...an idea or two on that," Clark said quietly, startling her slightly before she remembered what they'd been discussing before her irritating memory had gotten in the way. Why couldn't she get the way it had felt to be held by him, kissed by him, out of her head? You know, she sneered at her rebel other self acidly, it wasn't even actually that good.

"Which are?" she snapped, knowing that last for a lie and irked by the knowledge that she did.

It had been more than good.

"Well, we could always keep ourselves occupied..."

Her eyes flashed brimstone and fire. "Don't tell me - you brought along some more of those board-games of yours," she said with caustic wit. "What? A deck of cards? Sleuth? I am not playing Trivial Pursuit with you again, Kent. I told you that last time. You take these things entirely too seriously. You're a sore loser."

Clark firmly quashed the faint quirk of his lips that threatened to curve into a smile. That was his Lois. In the face of adversity, throw pure bravado at the enemy.

He shook his head. "No board-games," he agreed. He gave her another steady look and then reached out a hand to pat invitingly at the crate beside him, before taking a deep breath. "I thought we could talk."

"Talk?" She said it as though he'd just suggested the vilest thing she could imagine. But to her credit she didn't add, "About what?" as he'd thought she might. Though she sure didn't look keen to embark on a discussion. Which was hardly surprising. All things considered, there was really only one topic of conversation high on the agenda.

Clark paused. He wasn't that keen to embark on that discussion

himself, and, since Lois wasn't exactly leaping into the opening he'd given her and showed every sign of being just as reluctant as he was...maybe he should just let sleeping dogs lie. That would certainly be the safest, most sensible course to take.

/Just forget about it, Kent. She'll get over it eventually./

He nodded firmly, ignoring that saner, more cautious voice in his head.

/I'm telling you, Kent, this is a really bad idea./

"Talk." He indicated the crate again.

/Okay, fine. Be an idiot. Just don't say I didn't warn you, that's all./

Lois looked at his hand resting against the plastic, but she made no move to join him.

Clark sighed. "Lois, please. Just...sit," he said wearily, waving his hand in an impatient arc through the air between them. It was a gesture borne simply from frustration; it had no more intent or meaning behind it than that. But Lois, standing there before him and wrapped pensively in her own thoughts, caught the sharp motion out of the corner of her eye and recoiled from it violently, startling them both.

Clark froze, hand arrested in mid-air and for a moment, they stared at each other. It was difficult to say which of them was the most shocked by that instinctive shying away from him.

Clark's expression flickered first, dismayed, as Lois looked abruptly abashed and not a little confused.

No...God, don't let her be afraid of me, Clark thought desperately. Don't let me have made her afraid of what I might do. He couldn't stand the thought. It terrified him, made him feel sick to his stomach.

Lois wasn't afraid of him. She was afraid of herself. Afraid of what she'd almost given into before in this garage, in his arms - afraid of what she might do again, trapped here with him and with her own desire hammering its steady, painful beat against her breast. She shivered.

"Lois - " Clark broke the silence, finally, voice filled with the dismay he felt. He shook his head, unable to go on, the sick sensation in his throat choking him into silence.

She stood there, unable to move, unable to give him the slightest hint of encouragement that things were okay, quivering with reaction and...something more: something dark and bitter and old that harbored in her eyes and stared back at him from the depths of her soul.

Then she made a small involuntary move, a quick jerk of her chin: defiant.

"Okay," she said. "Let's talk." And was proud of herself for the way

she delivered it without a hint of the turmoil roiling within her. She could show him he wasn't affecting her. She wasn't afraid of him. She wasn't afraid of anything. And she wasn't going to have him think she was. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

He watched her, not looking entirely fooled by her casual air as she moved decisively to take the offered crate beside him as though it was the easiest, the most natural, the least dangerous thing in the world to do.

Her chin lifted an inch higher in response to that skepticism, her eyes fixed on him, rebellion brightening in them like the hard glitter of tears.

Unfortunately, focusing everything she had on maintaining the illusion of that air of calm and controlled ice left her blind to certain, important features of the surrounding landscape.

The toolbox lying abandoned among the folds of plastic sheeting between them, for one.

One moment she was feeling a smug sense of satisfaction over her ability to remain cool and detached and independent - outwardly at least - of the anxious whirlwind of her thoughts and the next she was heading in an abrupt, ungainly and headfirst dive for her partner's lap.

"Whoa...!"

She was aware of Clark's face turning startled, his eyes widening a touch as he moved instinctively with that exclamation, his hands coming up automatically to catch her against him as she hit him square in the chest with the hands she'd thrust out to break her fall. The drum on which he sat wobbled violently, lurched backwards and overturned, taking them both with it in a tumbled heap to the floor.

Clark had a split second to override reflexes that were clamoring to kick in and float him upwards before he hit the ground. Somehow, he managed it, landing heavily on his back with a thump a moment later. Lois landed even more heavily atop him with a small, stifled squeak a microsecond after, sprawled limply across his chest.

Clark didn't entirely mind. For one thing, he'd much rather be a convenient cushion than have Lois hit the floor in his place. She could have hurt herself. And for another...well he just wasn't going to think about the other, he told himself firmly, trying to shift the focus of his interested libido away from the not entirely unpleasant sensation of having that soft and feminine weight pressing him into the plastic covered stone floor beneath him...and the way she...

Stop it, Kent.

He closed his eyes and counted a slow, deliberate ten, employing a meditative Tai Chi relaxation exercise to will every muscle in his body into complete and utter stillness. Then made it twenty for good measure. Opening his eyes again he hesitated and then, feeling enough in control to be able to cope, glanced down to where his partner's dark head was buried face down against his chest, unmoving. He

reached out a hand, paused it awkwardly in midair for an instant, and then laid the tips of his fingers tentatively on her shoulder. "Lois? Are you okay?"

After a pause, the head moved in a nod.

Clark waited. "Oh," he said finally when no more response was forthcoming. He frowned. "Um..." He shifted his grip on her shoulder, setting the heel of his palm against her. His other hand wavered indecisively for a moment, trying to find a suitable perch to aid him in the quest that was innocuous and unthreatening enough not to startle either of them. Finally he gripped it loosely around her arm, using the twin leverage to ease himself gently out from under without dislodging her too violently in the process, as he tried to be gentlemanly about it.

Or at least that was the plan.

Even as he tried to ease himself discreetly clear, Lois, suddenly galvanized and recovering breath, struggled gamely upright, one hand splayed against his chest for balance. Her eyes met his and they froze.

As though a forcefield of sizzling heat and energy was suddenly cast around them, Clark was instantly aware of every point where they connected, of every nuance of their bodies as they lay entwined on the floor, in ways that made his nerve ends tingle with flickering desire.

Clark flushed, only slightly mollified to note that the echo of his own discomfort was in his partner's brown eyes as they remained locked with his own.

He broke the moment of mutual embarrassment first, forcing his gaze away.

"Sorry," he mumbled, shifting cautiously again. With the movement, Lois started, and then snatched back the fingers spread for balance against his upper thigh, as though only then becoming aware of their presence. A high stain of color suddenly spread on her cheeks.

She didn't move any further than that though.

Which made things awkward.

Very awkward.

Clark was discovering that doing what he wanted to most of all in the world right then - pry himself free of the body entwined with his own before he expired of embarrassment, and do it without touching any enticing part of it in any way, shape or form - was impossible without her co-operation. Which, strangely, didn't appear to be forthcoming.

Clark subsided again, giving up the effort for a moment, slightly nonplussed. "Uh...Lois...?" he ventured.

"HMMMMMM?" she murmured, distractedly.

"Uh, I have to... You know, if you'd just...a little..."

She stared back at him, giving no impression that she was listening.

"Sure..." she said hazily.

She didn't move, didn't break that thoughtful, blank eyed watch of him that was suddenly giving Clark the creeps. He wondered if she was a little dazed still by the fall. He stopped his attempts to get free of her again, confused by her lack of team spirit.

"Um...Lois...?" he prompted again, trying to get back on track, and this time, to his relief, she blinked, actually seeming to hear him for the first time.

"Huh? Oh..." She nodded. "Yes. Okay."

And she still made no move.

Clark hesitated, then sighed. Okay...

He shifted again, more circumspect this time and took hold on her upper arms, gripping the fragile bones beneath his fingers gently but firmly. "Excuse me," he said wryly, before he rolled them smoothly over, reversing their positions, pulling her beneath him, and then dragged himself clear and onto his knees beside her, all in one fluid motion.

Lois lay there, where he'd left her, her back against the cold, plastic- enshrouded floor, seemingly quite content to remain where she was. Clark, feeling as relieved as though he'd just completed a dangerous mission in enemy territory - against all odds and (relatively) unscathed - frowned down on her, more disconcerted than he wanted to admit by this odd behavior.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked, a touch anxiously. Maybe she was concussed. Had she knocked her head on the way down?

Lois seemed to think about it, fleetingly. She nodded and then levered herself upwards awkwardly to rest on her elbows. "Uh-huh."

She was staring at him so intently now he shifted in discomfort. His face felt odd, stiff, and he wondered what she saw in his expression to make her study him so hard.

"You want me to help you up?" he asked after a moment's silence settled awkwardly on them.

She didn't answer; didn't shift her gaze.

Clark, at a loss, fell back on the humor that so often got him out of trouble with his partner whenever he was feeling a little knocked off center by her.

/And into it too,/ his other self reminded him dryly.

He thrust that last to one side and smiled as he settled back more firmly on his heels and lifted his hands up, palms out. "I swear, I'll keep my hands to myself this time. Well, one of them anyway. And

the other won't go anywhere other than your arm. Honest."

Lois didn't seem to be listening, seeming to have retreated back into that inner meditative state.

"I won't kiss you either," Clark added and winced as he heard the jocular denial emerge from his lips, his uneasiness making him careless now.

/Oh, *that* one could have stayed unsaid. Great going, hot shot./

Lois' eyes narrowed on him. Her eyes...and, suddenly he realized what was wrong with his face: his glasses. They had been wrenched loose in the fall and now lay somewhere among the plastic sheeting...and he felt naked.

"What did you just say?" Lois murmured, her eyes fixed on him, unblinking and distant.

"Um..." Clark resisted the temptation to turn away; make some excuse. The garage was dark enough that his features would be blurred to her, he told himself; he was in no danger. And, besides, he didn't think he could look away: not if his life depended on it. Her eyes drew him, speared through him, transfixed him in place. He remembered her question. "That I wasn't going to touch you?"

"After that."

He swallowed. Her voice was a hoarse whisper in the garage's muggy air and somehow it set up ripples through him. "That...I wasn't going to kiss you?" he said cautiously.

"Oh," Lois said, small voiced. Did she sound...disappointed? "Okay," she added, her voice even and calm and curiously disconnected, as though it was coming a far distance out from her thoughts. She stared at him, seeming to weigh him in ways Clark found both arousing and disturbing.

He suddenly got a strange and unwelcome shiver of thought that made no sense at all but scared the hell out of him anyway. He was beginning to recognize the look on his partner's pale face. It was exactly the same, intense and ravenous look that a lioness in the Serengeti might take on when stalking an unwary zebra in the middle of a six-month famine - hungry, predatory - and, like that zebra, pinned under the heavy and oppressive weight of that steady, unblinking gaze, Clark was all at once rapidly beginning to feel threatened with extinction. He shook off the strange impression with a frown.

Don't be ridiculous, Kent.

He stared at her, growing more confused and uneasy by the moment. Way back in the small corners of his mind, almost lost beneath the sudden clamor of his heart in his ears, primal instincts were screeching a warning, urging him to run. The hackles on his neck began to rise...

...and then - as though something beyond her control had reached out, jabbed her firmly and prodded her into motion - Lois reached up to

fist her hands in his hair and yanked him firmly down to where her lips were waiting.

They fell back to the plastic sheeting. Clark found himself on top of his partner again and this time was perfectly content to stay here. Any surprise that he might have felt, any desire to pull away, was lost in the instant sizzle of electric charge that raced through him with the restless touch of her lips on his. His thoughts misted over, drowned in a blood red haze until minutes and moments spooled out in sweet, timeless desire.

With a low groan, Clark pulled her closer, their lips and hands caressing and exploring each other with a haste that was rough and gentle, calm and hurried, soft and frenzied. They rolled together, still locked in those breathless, fumbling explorations and heavy, sweet-scented kisses and came up hard against the crates behind them with a bone-jarring thump.

As though that jolt had shaken them back to their senses they froze, staring into each other's eyes.

Their lips were only inches apart. She could feel his rapid breath against her skin. They lay, arms around each other, eyes dazed and lost with the force of what had overtaken them, as they waited for some moment, some sign, some shattering thunderbolt of understanding to pierce the air and swallow them whole and give them license to continue what they had begun.

Panting heavily - a new sensation, he was never breathless, how could she make him breathless? - Clark shook his head, trying to clear some sense into it, and found himself melting again as his gaze was caught and held fast by the dark, clouded eyes of his partner. Eyes that were dilated with excitement and desire, hazed with the thrill of that kiss as much as he was...and as wide with confusion.

Lois' own breath was ragged in her chest as she stilled in the circle of his arms, watching him.

"What...*was* that?" Clark finally found breath enough to ask.

His eyes were hot and dark on hers and she could feel him trembling against her. She shook her head. "I have absolutely no idea," she said softly...and then she reached up to cup her palms around the back of his head, pulled him close, and sent him into oblivion again.

Lois felt dizzy, intoxicated. She had no explanation for her abandonment of all her carefully constructed defenses and the ploys that she had fostered during the day and evening, leading up to this heady, thrilling moment of surrender. She only knew that she felt relief at abandoning the pretense that he had no effect on her, as though a bubble of tension had burst in her heart, leaving her curiously free and strangely drunk on the sensations spilling through her as they kissed.

That drifting loss of control frightened her a little and yet - her trust of him instinctive - she knew that the hands that held her against that warm, masculine body were deft and sure, kind, and that in his arms she was safe, that she had no need of the reflexive barriers she had erected around her heart as protection in the past.

Apparently equally lost in the sensations she was drowning him in, Clark pulled them both to their knees and she forgot to think, gave up questioning, surrendered herself to the intoxicating, bewildering, exhilarating feel of the lips and hands caressing her, exploring her, taking her into the void of heat and desire and shifting, pulsing colors that waited for her in the darkness.

Clark had no idea how long that haze of fever lasted, but suddenly he became aware of something that his partner's warm and pliant body against his had hitherto managed to distract him from; a distinct and puzzling slow spreading chill that was advancing up the leg of his jeans.

With an effort, he turned his head awkwardly away from where his lips were exploring the moist, salt-sweet taste of his partner's. Lois shifted smoothly away and focused her energies on caressing his neck with soft, lingering open-mouthed kisses, unfazed by his sudden lack of attention, barely aware of it other than existing somewhere in the periphery of the blissful daze she was lost in. An appreciative groan building in his throat as she drove him crazy with her attentions, Clark frowned downward. He stifled another soft groan, one that this time had nothing to do with the trail of fire Lois was skimming across his jaw. He closed his eyes briefly, letting his forehead fall forward against her shoulder in a gesture of despair.

Oh, this was just great.

She was going to kill him.

He lifted his head again.

"Uh...um...Lois..." he mumbled against her hair, trying to get her attention as she continued to string breathless sighs and kisses across his neck. "Lois...you have to..." He sighed and reached up to take reluctant hold of her shoulders, pulling her gently clear of him. "...take off your skirt."

Lois gazed at him, a slightly hazed look in her eyes - which cleared abruptly. "Huh?" She frowned at him. "What?"

Clark chuckled softly and shook his head. "I'm not trying to rush things here, Lois," he reassured her as she stared at him, a suddenly wary light entering her eyes and dousing the desire residing there. "But you do need to take off your skirt." He put a hand to her chin and used the gentle leverage to turn her head to her right. He pointed downwards.

Lois let her eyes follow the gesture. For a moment there was silence. "Oh..." she said.

The oil drum on which Clark had been sitting and which now lay on its side a few yards away hadn't been entirely empty it appeared. Lois' eyes followed the sluggish drip of dark, viscous liquid as it dribbled from the open hole in its top, to where the drip became a flowing pool spreading its way across the plastic sheeting.....and then all the way down to where it was...soaking steadily into the hem of her skirt as she knelt close against her partner. Already a good couple of inches of the tweed were soaked through.

"Oh!" she said again, more animated this time and then, "Oh no!" She leapt to her feet even as Clark put his hands on her arms and raised her to stand with him.

"Hey, it's okay," he tried to soothe her, noting the panicked look that was taking hold of her face. "It's just clothes, Lois. They'll clean."

"Clean! Look at this!" Lois waved a hand across the stained skirt with that howl and Clark steadied her with a tightening of his grip. "Do you *know* how much this skirt cost?!"

"Honestly, it'll be fine. My - "

"Oh, don't say it, Clark! Your Mom's got the perfect herbal remedy for when you've been rolling around in a blaze of...of passion in a pool of motor oil!"

Clark tried not to laugh. "Well, actually..."

Lois groaned and this time he did laugh, reaching to hug her quickly against him for an instant. Lois looked at him, startled, as he let her go. He held out a hand as he stepped back. "Here, give it to me," he ordered calmly.

Lois, of course, took immediate exception to that take-charge manner.

"Don't you take that tone with me, Clark Kent!" she snapped, even as she took his advice, hopping from foot to foot as she kicked off her pumps and began to divest herself of her stained pantyhose with unselfconscious though violent and irritated jerks of her hands.

"This is all your fault in the first place! If you hadn't gone picking oil drums to sit on..." She wadded the ruined nylon into a ball and tossed it atop a nearby crate, still spitting vitriol as Clark watched her, amusement twitching at the corner of his lips until he bit down firmly, stilling it. "And if you hadn't gone riling me up in the first place -- " She hauled at the waistband of her skirt, yanking it around to where she could reach its button.

"Sorry," he said contritely, although there was a definite twinkle still in his eyes that didn't mollify Lois half as much as his apologetic tone did. She glared at him.

"I can't help it, it's bred in me," Clark went on innocently. "You can't spend all your life being raised down on the farm without learning something about taking control in a crisis. You should try hauling out your best milk cow from a ditch in a raging blizzard. Dealing with something like this - " he waved a hand over her as she struggled with the button, " - is a snap compared to that kind of thing."

Lois grumbled something under her breath as she jerked at her zipper, which, although she was convinced it was too low to be heard, brought a wide grin to her partner's lips. When she looked up again it was to find him standing in front of her and offering up her jacket.

Slightly appeased, she reached out to take it from him and then looked dismayed. "Oh, Clark, your jeans!" She waved a hand at him, noting the oil soaked knee of his pants' leg for the first time. He had gotten off more lightly than she had, but the staining was still considerable.

"It'll wash out," Clark shrugged at her with the reiteration. "It's no big deal, Lois. Now, hurry up and get that off before you get covered in the stuff," he added.

Lois nodded. Halfway to shimmying the ruined skirt down her thighs she paused, raising her head to look back up at him. She flushed a little as she caught him watching her, eyes rapt and distant, entirely unaware of how much hunger had risen unbidden in that captivated stare.

"What are you doing?" Lois asked mildly.

"Huh? Oh! Oh, yeah, um...sorry, I just... Sorry!" Clark turned his back on her hastily.

Lois fought a grin, straightening as she stepped out of the skirt in one, practiced motion. "No, I mean, shouldn't you be taking those off too?"

"What?" Clark started to turn with the puzzled question and then hastily stopped the movement cold. He listened to the sounds of Lois shrugging on her jacket, small, furtive noises that brought out a line of cold sweat on his forehead. He made himself wait until he was certain she had buttoned it around her and then turned around to face her with a raised brow.

"Your jeans," Lois continued the conversation. "Take them off."

Clark took an automatic glance downwards and then came back to her face. "Don't be silly, Lois. I can't take them off."

She glanced up at him as she finished with the last of the buttons. "What do you mean you can't? You have to. They're soaked through."

"It'll dry." He looked down again. "It's not so bad," he added, somewhat lamely.

"Don't be ridiculous." Lois folded her skirt briskly and placed it on a nearby crate out of the way of any further harm. She grimaced over the stain. "Take them off."

"Lois..."

She stopped, turning around to look at him, taken by the newly stubborn note attached to that growl of her name. One brow rose sharply as she realized he was blushing. "Oh, wait. You're *embarrassed* to take off your jeans?"

"No..." he denied uncomfortably. "I just don't think it matters, that's all."

He walked over to the back of the garage as he threw the opinion over his shoulder at her. He began hunting around on the shelves and came up with a square metal can. Searching further, he scooped up a pile of reasonably clean rags and headed back towards her.

Watching him return, Lois folded her arms. "Oh, I see. So it's perfectly okay for *me* to get half naked, but not for you?"

"Lois, it's not the same thing!" he protested that. He handed her the can and the rags. She took them automatically, giving the can a suspicious stare. "Evoline," he informed her. "The pit crews use it. It should clean you up pretty good." He gestured at the dark stains the oil had left on her legs.

"Oh." Lois uncapped the can with a shrug, poured a liberal amount of the solution onto the rag and began to scrub vigorously at her knees, gratified to note an immediate lightening of her skin. "It's not?" she added.

Clark took a second to backtrack to the previous conversation. Then he tore his eyes from where they'd been studying her legs - oil stained or not they were worth studying - especially minus the distractions of skirt and hosiery, their long, shapely and spectacular length showcased as they were by that jacket. "Sure it's not!" he declared, finding his place again.

"Why not?"

"Why - ? Because - " He floundered, waving a hand in vague emphasis as a filler while he thought.

"Hah! Exactly!" Lois straightened to dart a triumphant finger at him, case proved.

" - because it just isn't!" Clark finished. "I don't have anything else to wear while they dry like you do. And anyway, you're not...half-naked..." he paused over the words as they produced an unexpected accompanying image that he really didn't need to see right then. He frowned. "That jacket's longer than some skirts you wear," he finally found his reason. "You don't look any more naked than you would on any normal day at the office!"

Lois glanced down at the jacket. He was right of course. It was of the more fashionable longer length and reached slightly further than mid thigh, almost to her knees in fact, and she'd worn far shorter skirts in her time. But that wasn't the point...well, not any more. She was intrigued now. She looked back up at her partner.

"That's not the point," she voiced the thought as she took a last swipe at her shin with the rags and then handed them back to Clark with the Evoline.

"Oh? So the point is...?"

"The point is, this is an equal opportunities world now, Clark. And those jeans are wet."

"Lois, there are some things you just can't *be* equal with when it comes to men and women," Clark insisted as he put the can and rags

down on a nearby crate and set about righting the oil drum. He waved her off the plastic sheet so that he could fold up the stained portion and contain the spillage. He put it in the corner, out of the way.

"We're different!" Turning around, his eyes caught a gleam next to one of the crates. He bent and retrieved his glasses, remarkably unscathed. He held them for a second, hesitating, and then tucked them into the pocket of his jeans to hang by one temple. He looked up mulishly at Lois again. "And you can say what you like about that, but I am *not* taking these off!"

Lois laughed suddenly and he looked at her, surprised. "What?"

She shook her head, her air of amusement deepening. "Nothing. I was just thinking that there was a time back there I don't think you'd have objected."

Clark colored, remembering their frantic explorations of a moment earlier. He ducked his head as he fixed his gaze on the floor. "Probably not," he admitted candidly. He looked up at her again. "Lois, I'm - "

Lois set her hands on her hips. "If the next word out of your mouth is sorry, Clark Kent, I might just have to show you I can punch as hard as I can kiss!" she warned him dangerously, removing her right hand *from* her hip and fisting it in anticipation.

Clark blinked, and then prudently shut his mouth over the forbidden word, which had indeed been about to enter the conversation. He sat down on the crate behind him, slipping off oil-sodden trainers and sports socks before setting them gingerly to one side. He picked up the Evoline and tipped a little onto one of the clean rags before beginning a half-hearted dabbing at the right knee of his jeans.

"Why is it you men are so damned arrogant you think you're always in charge of things like that?" Lois went on, irked. "As though you're the ones making the decisions, the only ones who have to fight their hormones? The only ones who get tempted once in a while?"

"Well - "

"I was the one landed on *you*, remember! Women can lose control too, you know!"

A faint gleam came into her partner's eyes as he glanced up from his ministrations. "I'm sure they do, Lois," he agreed smoothly.

Lois gave him a sharp look, suspecting he was mocking her, and then let it go as she grunted a soft breath. "Well, just remember that," she said tartly and then dropped her hands, softening all at once. "What happens here, between us, Clark, the decisions we make, isn't something you're going to do alone."

"No," he agreed, more seriously. He put down his repair kit carefully and rested his elbows on his knees, knitting his fingers loosely where they hung between them. He took a small moment before he looked up on her. "So...what *are* we going to do?" he asked levelly.

Lois drew a steady breath. "Well..." She moved for him, settling herself easily and unselfconsciously into his lap. She frowned, wriggled a little, causing Clark to suck in a tight breath, and then shifted to glance downward, where something unexpected was nudging at her left knee. Her frown cleared as she reached down to pluck his glasses from his pocket and laid them safely on the crate beside her, out of her way.

Clark watched her with bemusement and then, in a movement that seemed entirely natural to him now, put his arms around her waist to hold her safely in place as she straightened up again, clasping his fingers casually in the small of her back as he waited for her answer.

She smiled at him, reaching up and entwining her fingers at the back of his neck. "...let's start with this."

This turned out to be a soul-searing kiss that dazzled his senses for a long, lingering moment.

When it broke finally, he laid his forehead against her shoulder with a low sigh, content, for just that one moment, to lose himself in her: no questions asked.

Lois drew her cheek against his hair and closed her eyes, breathing soft and slow. She had no idea what was happening to her any more - to either of them, since Clark seemed as affected as she was.

"Does this seem real to you, Clark?" she whispered.

He smiled as he shifted, setting his lips gently to the soft pulse in the hollow of her throat. His hand made its way to her knee and then slid upwards until it found hidden delights beneath the hem of her jacket. She felt his soft chuckle burr against her skin as his fingers flexed against her thigh, thumb pressing roughly arousing circles into the smooth flesh there, making her heart jump giddily in her breast.

"Feels real enough to me, Lois," he murmured and then lifted his head to kiss her gently, his eyes warmly amused.

Lois sighed as she pulled free of that caress after a moment and let herself relax against his shoulder. "That's not what I meant," she chided and, beneath the light tone, there was still a frisson of unease.

They were acting like lovers, like they'd known each other intimately for years. Where was the awkwardness? Wasn't there supposed to be some embarrassing fumbling around here? A sense of disquiet to mark the change in their relationship?

It wasn't natural to feel this comfortable snuggled against her partner, when only scant hours before she had denied her love for him, had refused to believe that he had snuck his way into her heart, had told herself furiously that she wasn't going to be suckered into risking that heart again. It wasn't natural to feel that she was reaching out to the other half of her soul, that she was touching someone who knew her thoughts, who knew what was harbored in the depths of her heart, almost before she did. The sudden reversal of emotion was dizzying, slightly frightening, and yet it felt so right,

so clear...so wonderfully, beautifully clear, that she couldn't question it for long.

To question it too deeply might be to break the spell, might cause her to find answers she didn't want to hear, might bring a return to her earlier fears, of the memories of times past when other men had seemed to be what she wanted, what she needed. Men who could be trusted with her heart and who she had offered that heart to, sure and certain that her love and trust were given in return, only to find herself seduced by the glitter of fool's gold in their eyes; not true love at all.

She had sworn she would never offer her heart up as a sacrificial lamb to love again. Not ever again. Not after...not after *him*.

Clark burrowed his chin against her hair, a soothing gesture that made her close her eyes momentarily and melted the sudden turn of her thoughts, bitter and cold, turning them to swift fire.

"I know what you meant," he agreed, turning solemn. "Yes, it's real. It's probably the most real thing I've ever known. But..."

She raised her head to look into his face as he paused and he met her gaze with a sheepish shrug. "It's kind of like a dream too."

Lois nodded. He had no need to elaborate on just what particular brand of his dreams they were currently enacting; she'd had those kinds of dreams too.

"This is just so crazy," she murmured.

She felt his arms tighten slightly around her. He put his chin in the dip of her shoulder. His sigh seemed to speak of regret, as though anticipating the loss of something he'd only just learned to value and been given the chance to find.

"Clark, that doesn't mean I want to stop," she said softly. "It's just...I feel so confused. I don't know what I want any more. Just a few minutes ago I was telling myself this was the last thing I *ever* wanted and when you kissed me...I mean before when you kissed me, before we were locked in..."

"Which wasn't the greatest idea I've ever had," Clark said with another sigh.

"No. Except..."

He lifted his head and when she kept her chin tucked low on her chest, her gaze fixed on her lap, he unwound his arms from around her. His hand brushed a light caress across her cheek and then he hooked a thumb beneath her jaw to tilt her face and find her disconcerted eyes. "Except...?"

"Except...I *do* know that I want you. All at once, crazy as it sounds, that's the only thing I know with any certainty at all right now."

Clark's eyes devoured hers for a long, timeless instant and Lois caught her breath at the sudden glitter that flared in them like twin

flames of amber among the shadows of the garage. "For now," he said, voice gentle in startling contrast to the raw desire burning in those eyes, "that's enough."

And then he kissed her, his hands moving to press her to him as though he was afraid to let her go, wanted to hold her to him forever. His fingers clenched themselves at the back of her neck, glorying in the feel of silk against them as they fisted in her hair.

Lois sighed softly as she framed his face with her hands, all of her fears forgotten, all of her questions dissolving, all of her senses filling with him. There was only him. The clean soap and water and tangy cologne scents of him surrounding her, the feel of him beneath her hands as they roamed his shoulders and back, clinging tight as she sobbed out a breath around the tightness in her chest, the solid muscles bunching and flexing beneath her fingers. His mouth on hers, his hands exploring her with as much eagerness to learn everything there was to know about her as she longed to know him: strength and tenderness combined.

Somehow they found their way to the plastic sheeting again, Clark twisting to break her fall, their bodies melding in a slow, gliding rush to passion.

Time was a distant concept in the floating heat of their shifting bodies. Lois drifted on sighs of pleasure and against the hands that held her, stroked and caressed her...moving like rough silk against her shoulders, the sides of her throat, down across her hips and over her thighs, her clothing suddenly no barrier to their explorations. And everywhere that his hands touched, his lips followed to dart whorls of pleasure across her skin.

Her sigh merged with his as his mouth explored hers with a fervor she had only known in her dreams and...

...and, she was half-naked in his arms.

Confused, she turned her head as Clark's lips shifted course away from hers and began a tantalizing, provocative trail down her throat and the long bone of her sternum.

When had he...?

Her gaze fixed on a scrap of cream lace she recognized, abandoned on the plastic beside her - intact - he hadn't torn it from her.

Not that she would have cared if he had. Right at this particular moment, she couldn't have cared if he'd...oh, god...if he'd...

Her thoughts grayed out, the quick, fleeting puzzlement dissolved, caught up in the maelstrom and whirled away like leaves caught in a typhoon as Clark continued to caress her with his lips...and then came back online an indecipherable time later as she pulled away from him, panting roughly, but too curious to let it lie.

"How did you do that?" she said, pushing him back as she sat up and reached for the tangled scraps of lace. Just as she'd suspected, there was no sign of tearing. It had been taken from her cleanly. And without her realizing it at all. But...she glanced downwards...she

was still wearing her blouse. Separating her from her jacket - which lay in a crumpled heap against one crate - without her noticing the move she could understand. But her bra? How had he done that? Gotten one from her without the other?

"Huh?" He lifted his head and then saw the scraps of lace she held in her hand. For a moment, something indefinable chased its way across his eyes, almost panic, and then he shrugged and reached to gather her up close against him again. His lips returned to her throat, retracing their path of a moment earlier, moving on to capture the lobe of her ear between tender teeth, before he let go. The tip of an inquisitive tongue darted into the soft shell within. Lois felt her thoughts begin to shiver along with her body. She closed her eyes and whimpered.

And shook her head in a determined attempt to clear her thoughts, refusing to be distracted. Especially, as she was now aware, it was so obvious a distraction and so clearly intended to make her forget the question. She put a hand to his chest in absent protest.

"No...no, I...ohhhhh...no, I mean it. How?"

She felt him sigh slightly, then nuzzle up against the line of her jaw.

"Erghart's Fourth Law..." he murmured.

Lois opened her eyes with a frown.

"Erghart's Fourth Law?"

Clark nodded, his eyes intent on the slow and sultry path his finger had begun tracing across her belly and ribs. Lois shuddered faintly with his touch and heard a soft sigh escape her lips. Her eyes drifted closed again.

"Mmmmm-hmmmm. Erghart's Fourth Law of Interstellar Juxtaposition. When two heavenly bodies collide..." Clark's softly hypnotic voice caressed her ear in explanation, "...clothing just gets in the way."

Lois, who'd actually been suckered in for long enough to think he was giving her some serious theory, responded to this last by collapsing in hysterical laughter against the plastic sheeting.

Clark looked down at her, grinning at her convulsions as she wrapped her arms around ribs that were already beginning to ache.

After a moment, he leaned over her and laid a warm hand against her stomach, before pressing his lips lightly to the soft skin just above her navel. Lois' laughter stopped short on a startled hiccup. She stared up at him, slightly wide eyed. He bent closer, setting his lips against the curve of her shoulder.

Lois' breath began to quicken. Her heart raced rough and hard against her ribs, thundering like a storm.

Clark lifted his head and drew the pad of his thumb experimentally across the bone of her cheek, following the line of her jaw as he

watched her irises contract sharply with desire, her eyes becoming dark, limpid pools of heat. He could drown in those eyes. He could drown and die happy, fall in deep and never find his way back to steady ground...

...and care less if he didn't.

He shifted his other hand, caressing his way up the slope of her breast and onto her shoulder where he kneaded gently at the rounded bone, letting her cool slightly, wanting this to last. He traced the sharp line of her clavicle to her throat and then cupped his hand around the side of her neck, pulling her gently forward and onto his kiss.

When at last he released her, she smiled up at him and snuggled her way closer against his chest with a small sigh. Clark rested his weight on one elbow, lying on his side to hold her close. He closed his eyes as he nuzzled his cheek against her hair. He glanced down and then shifted to take her hand in his, turning it over and running a slow thumb across her palm. His eyes darkened as he traced the shadowed patch discoloring its heel.

"I'm sorry about this," he said and, as Lois raised her head slightly to see what he was talking about, he pulled the hand to his lips and set them softly to the bruise marring her skin.

"It's okay. It doesn't hurt," she said, feeling her heart melt at the tenderness in the gesture and what she found in his eyes as she raised her own to find them in the shadows. She pulled her hand gently free of his and laid it against his cheek and then, sensing his mood turn, decided some distraction was in order.

"So..." she said as she dropped the hand to run the tip of one finger across his shoulder, "...you think you're a heavenly body do you?"

Clark flushed slightly. "Well...one of us is," he hedged, shifting her in his arms so that she lay against the one wrapped around her. He bent his head to take possession of her lips with his own. She surrendered to the gentle, insistent kiss eagerly and sighed as he withdrew slightly.

They broke apart momentarily, lay quiet for a moment, caressing each other softly, exploring with light, butterfly kisses and strokes of their hands.

Lois shook her head as her fingers laid themselves to the smooth and warm heat of a muscular chest. "'Erghart's Fourth Law'," she said, mock derisive. "'Clothing just gets in the way'. You smooth-talker, you; I bet they teach you that kind of sweet-talk in kindergarten back in the farm state, don't they?"

She glanced up and into his smug smile that saw right past her air of scorn.

"'Romance and the Art of Wooing the City Girl 101'," he corrected her soberly. "Class of '88. And in the Sunflower State. Kansas," he said as she questioned him silently, "it's the Sunflower State, not the Farm State."

Lois rolled her eyes and resisted the temptation to ask if that made him the Sunflower Boy - or Pedantic Boy, one of the two. She tilted up her head to view him better. "Grade A Honor Student?" she suggested, getting back to what interested her more and shaking off the sudden mental image that assailed her of Clark wearing nothing but a sunflower where Adam chose a fig leaf while she played 'he loves me, he loves me not' with the petals.

"But of course."

"Mmmmmmm-hmmmm." She nodded and snuggled up against his chest, watching her fingers journey across his stomach as they played with the soft line of hair that ran intriguingly from just below his navel and into the dark, mysterious and unexplored territory below the waistband of his jeans. Which, with a little luck, just might not remain unexplored for very much longer.

"So...Mr. Phi Beta Cappa...in that case," she asked curiously after a moment, "since clothing gets in the way...why didn't you get rid of this too?"

She tugged at the edge of her blouse as she glanced up into his face and then quirked an interested brow as her teasing question brought unexpected dividends, Clark growing an instant and fascinating shade of puce.

He looked away from her as she fixed him with her interrogative gaze, then hastily changed direction a second time as, in the pursuit of something less dangerous to focus on, he found his eyes falling on the evidence - tempting and soft and flushed with a faint, shell-pink glow that made him want to reach out and touch - of his indiscretion. Which wasn't less dangerous to focus on at all - not by a long shot.

"Clark?"

Clark flinched. He knew that tone. It was her 'You-might-as-well-tell-me-now-because-I-won't-give-up-asking-till-you-do' tone. He sighed.

"Well, I wanted to...touch you...there..." His hand made an indeterminate gesture in the air close to her breasts and then leapt away as though of the opinion that it was a personal air space way too far. Lois' eyes grew a wicked gleam.

"Where?" she said innocently, glancing down and then straightening, her back arching a little to press the anatomy in question high against his pectorals. Clark made a small, strangled sound, deep in his throat. "Here?" she murmured huskily.

"Yeah...t-there," he agreed, with a quick nod, as though hoping the answer would back her off...

...and hoping desperately that it wouldn't too.

Lois grinned, staying precisely where she was. Was her usually indubitably cool as ice partner beginning to sweat? "So you...disposed of this..." She reached out a languid hand and picked up the discarded bra, twirling it suggestively around one finger as she offered him a sly glance from underneath prim lashes.

"Yeah," Clark said, uncomfortably.

"But..." she prodded inquisitively. "You left my *blouse* on..."

Clark's embarrassment deepened considerably as she tailed off expectantly. Lois thought that she had never seen anyone change color so fast...and with so many variations of shade too.

"I thought...well, if you weren't sure you wanted to...I mean, if I was moving too fast...for you...you could always cover up if you wanted to. If I kept the blouse on, I mean," he mumbled. He glanced up at her quickly and earnestly, missing her amusement entirely in his guilt and keen to explain. "I wanted it to be your choice. So you could change your mind...if you wanted...and then you wouldn't be...well, embarrassed or uncomfortable about...about me...touching you...there," he finished uneasily, lapsing into a discomfited silence.

"Oh." Lois amusement faded as her heart did an odd little double leap in her breast. She let the bra fall. "Oh, Clark..." she whispered, her voice molten with emotion. "That's...that's the sweetest thing I've ever heard."

Clark frowned. "It is?"

She smiled, a watery smile, and sniffled slightly as she reached up and put her arms around his neck, her cheek against his. "Yes." She nodded her head once, firmly. "It is."

"Oh." Clark still sounded bemused as to what he'd just said that was right, but he slid his arms around her anyway and held her close against him. After a moment or two, she began to laugh softly against the warm skin of his neck and felt him pull slightly clear of her the better to view her face.

"What?"

She shook her head, answering the question with a small smile as she lay back against the encircling support of his arms again and looked up into his face. "I guess I was right," she said. She reached up a soft hand to brush at that wayward lock of hair as it tumbled over his forehead, just the way she'd longed to do for so long now. "That Smallville luck of yours *is* in tonight, isn't it?"

He answered her smile with one of his own; that devastating, handsome smile that sparked a small warm glow in the middle of her chest. He traced her face with solemn eyes as he stroked a hand into her hair. "So soft," he murmured. "Like silk..."

Lois remembering suddenly how she had thought the same of him, blushed, just a little, and ducked her head. Had it only been a matter of hours before, just that afternoon, when she had realized the truth about her feelings for her partner and felt like running a million miles away from him?

Clark gave up trailing his fingers through the dark tangle of her hair after a moment, his eyes turning intent and serious all at once. His grip on her shifted purposefully and she let herself be pushed

back beneath his advance, her hands spread lightly against the smoothly muscled warmth of his arms.

She watched her hands as they traced a route up along those strongly defined biceps and onto the firm ridges of his shoulders and then grimaced as she felt the hard, uneven surface of the concrete floor beneath her. Clark tilted his head to regard her questioningly and then, seemingly recognizing her discomfort and its source, paused, disconcerted. He sighed.

"This isn't going to work."

"No, it'll be just fine - " Lois protested gamely, but it was half-hearted at best and she tried not to wriggle uncomfortably as she felt a particularly rough patch scrape just below her right shoulder. It felt like a moon rock.

Clark shook his head and began to retreat back onto his knees, pulling her with him. Lois put out a hand, stopping him. "No, really, wait. I'm sure we can...work around this..." she trailed off uncertainly and then blushed fiercely. God, what are you *saying*, Lane?

But even as the panicked thought flitted through her mind, she knew that she didn't have to pretend. Not with him. He wouldn't use her emotions against her, would never take advantage or use the raw, biological urging of her body against her. She could be unguarded with him and never feel threatened at all.

As she was coming to terms with this revelation, Clark put out a hand, cupping at her chin and raising it slightly to catch hold of her eyes with his.

"Lois, it's okay," he said gently as though seeing her thoughts held stark in the deep, velvet depths. "I'm not going to - " his soft reply was cut off as she returned her fingers to his lips, watching him solemnly.

"Play fair, Kent," she told him. She didn't want undying declarations from him. She just wanted him to love her. Hold her. Take her to heights she'd never found before. Stay with her forever. Never let her go.

That wasn't too much to ask. Was it?

Clark smiled and kissed the fingers pressed against his mouth, taking hold of her wrist and removing them gently.

"So...you have a plan...?" he asked.

"Huh?"

He grinned. "About this...comfort thing."

"Oh." She shrugged in his embrace as he shifted to lie lightly against her, his arms enfolding her against his chest. "Well...not that we have a lot of options. I mean...aside from a few stacks of shelving - don't let that give you ideas, Kent - and a desk, where else could we - ?" She trailed off.

There was a weighted pause and then, almost in one move, their heads swung in tandem to the shrouded, tarp-covered object in the middle of the floor. Clark looked back at Lois and raised sharp brows. She collapsed against his chest, laughing wildly, and then clapped her hands against her mouth, looking at him wide-eyed above her fingers. Finally, she pulled her hands clear.

"Clark...we *can't*." She looked back at the car. "Can we?"

He shifted, rising to his feet. "Come on."

She giggled as he took her hand, pulling her to stand with him, and then shrieked softly as he bent to sweep her into his arms before she could realize his intent. He grinned at her as, laughing helplessly, she buried her face against his chest for a moment, before relaxing into his shoulder.

Reaching the racecar, he set her carefully on her feet and then paused. He reached out with a soft smile and put up a hand to stroke briefly at her cheek. "Wait here," he said and then vanished into the shadows before she could ask where he was going.

A moment later she heard a heavy, scraping noise. She stepped to one side and then around the back of the car and saw him dragging one of the crates across the floor. From the ease with which he was doing it, it was either half-empty or not full at all. "What are you doing?"

He looked up at her as he pushed the crate the final couple of inches to lay snug against the locked door of the garage. "I don't want to be disturbed," he said, as he headed off to get a second. He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Do you?"

Lois shook her head. He smiled. "Good." He pulled the second crate into place and added a third, before straightening to brush the dust from his hands with a satisfied grin. "These won't stop anyone getting in, but by the time they get through the barricades we'll have an early warning signal that they're on their way." He looked over at her. "Now...where were we?"

Lois started giggling again as he moved to sweep her into his arms and carry her back to where she'd started out from. Setting her down a second time, he reached out to strip the tarp cover from the gleaming vehicle with one swift snap of his wrists. They stared down at it for a moment.

It *was* beautiful, Lois thought in reluctant admiration; even she had to admit to it. Sleek and smooth, slim in the chassis, and with an air of raw energy and reserved power about it just waiting to be unleashed...

She grinned. Just like her partner, she thought, giving him an equally admiring sideways glance.

She looked back at the car, running her eyes up along the gleaming paint-work, an astonishingly eclectic mish-mash of bright poisonous green and virulent yellow, slashed through with a crimson lightning bolt that, against all rules of logic, somehow seemed to work. In the center of the design, Tirelli's salamander pranced, pinprick eyes glittering, breathing fire at its rivals. Her gaze moved up further

to the tiny, narrow cockpit.

"We'll never get in there!" she said.

Clark chuckled. "Didn't think we would."

She looked at him, questioningly, and he put his arms around her and pulled her against his chest. Lois started giggling again as he turned smoothly on one heel and lowered her gently to lie against the tapering nosecone of the car.

Her giggles died as he followed her down and, suddenly solemn, she put out a hand, splaying it against one bare, smooth shoulder, stopping him cold. He gave her a questioning and slightly uncertain look, and a gleam of mischievous heat kindled itself in her eyes. She sat up as he straightened to stand there, watching her, intent on her next move, as though trying to second-guess what it would be.

Lois' hands made their way to her blouse. She kept her eyes on him as she drew the edges clear of her body, saw his gaze flicker and fall to fix on this almost ceremonial unveiling with interest. Lois bit down into her bottom lip with small, even teeth as she slowly tugged the green striped cotton down off of her shoulders. She let it slither down to rest in a puddle of darkness around her elbows and then shrugged her way out of it in a smooth and practiced motion that darkened the eyes of her partner.

She set it to one side, draping it across the plastic covered wheel to her left without any hint of self-consciousness at being naked before him. She smoothed a hand across it for an instant and then looked up at him again, drawing in a steadying breath so small that another man may have missed it.

Clark didn't. Nor did he miss its importance; she wasn't half as calm and collected as she was pretending to be. But that only made her gesture all the sweeter as she offered herself up to him without reservation and made herself naked before him - in more and deeper ways than just divesting herself of her clothing alone.

Keeping that soft and trusting gaze on him, Lois let herself fall back against the car again. Against the blaze of brightly painted metal, swirls of rich metallic green and yellow clashed around her body, like a Technicolor storm.

She reached up and stretched out a hand for him, her eyes full and luminous as the moon that shone in them from the window overhead.

Clark took it with a smile and let her pull him down, his body covering hers as he settled himself lightly against her and put his lips to the hook of her jaw. Lois moaned quietly as she ran her hands up into his hair and pressed him deeper against her. Obedient to her desire his mouth traced a spell of warm caresses across the pulse line of her throat and then moved on to nuzzle at the sensitive spot just behind her ear before he shifted restlessly, his mouth covering hers again hungrily.

His hands, deft and sure as they journeyed over her skin, found their way to the inward curve of her waist. He marveled at its narrowness, so slight and slender that he could almost span it entirely as he

splayed those hands loosely across the fragile bones in his grasp. They settled there, his thumbs stroking, soft as moths' wings, against her skin. He used that gentle grip to tug her higher, aided by the smooth, frictionless glide of her body against the polished surface of the metal beneath her.

And then he broke clear, levering himself to rest on his palms to enable him to look down into her flushed face and bright, sparkling eyes. His own gaze was solemn and intense, deep and dark, seeming to convey some silent message as they rested on hers. Lois stilled, eyes questioning.

Clark dipped his head, his mouth brushing lightly against her lips. That fleeting touch firmed for just an instant, becoming fierce again almost against his will as he groaned into the warm, moist cavern of her mouth, then he pulled away, letting himself roll slightly to rest on one elbow, his body still draped half atop hers. His free hand lifted, his thumb drawing a rough and steady path across her kiss-swollen lips and then up across her jaw, where his touch firmed, holding her cradled in the palm of his hand, fingers splayed against the side of her neck. His thumb hooked itself beneath her chin and tilted it, giving him access to the long slope of her throat as he stretched up to set his lips there and then drew them downward.

The swift and sweet pulse beneath her skin shivered through his lips as he followed it down to its hearts-spring. She tasted of roses.

The mouth teasing her shifted - the muscular body of her lover settling more heavily against her again. His tongue found her throat, the shell of her ear and the sensitive patch of skin behind. His lips caressed the dip of her shoulder, trailed their way down to find the soft hollow of her inner arm at her elbow and set themselves to her wrist. His hands found other places more tantalizing to explore, her hips, her thighs...she quivered.

His kiss landed lightly against the side of her knee before he dropped finally to kneel on the plastic sheeted floor in front of the car.

He let his eyes drift upward, taking his time in exploring all of her curves, as though committing to memory every plain and shadow, before they lifted to her face, pausing where her lips, kiss-reddened, held a sheen that captivated his attention momentarily. In the darkness, she was a creation in alabaster and ivory, a living, breathing work of art.

Lois watched him from beneath her lashes, her heart drumming a hard thunder against her ribs, a flicker of discomfort stirring in her at the intensity of his gaze as it roamed across her body, and then he looked up at her face. Even in the shadows she could see what was glowing in his eyes, deep and bright in those amber depths as they feasted, solemn and almost reverential, on her: a light that glittered from within. Desire and heat warred in them. Lois felt a warm flush heat her skin. Not embarrassment but wonder that she could inspire such emotions in any man. There wasn't just appreciation of her in those hotly burning eyes, not just a deep need and desperate wanting, there was awe too and a wonder as heartfelt as her own.

Then Clark ducked his head, breaking the spell. Lois drew in a soft breath as his hand found her foot and lifted it so that his lips could press themselves lightly to the bow, the high arch and the bone of her ankle.

His fingers wrapped themselves around its slim curve, pulling her leg gently taut as he explored ever upward, reversing his sensuous course of a moment earlier. Lois trembled.

Clark's mouth found its way to the dip of her navel and Lois moaned as he ran the tip of a restless, roving tongue around its edge before plunging it deeply into the soft hollow. She tasted of soap there: lavender and honey. He continued his slow journey upwards, mapping out her skin.

His lips found hers again and she pressed herself eagerly against him, whispering a litany of breathless, wordless exhortations against his ear, her hands caressing his back and shoulders, her small murmurs and pleadings piteous in the darkness.

Clark, while both gratified and pleased by her responses to his touch, was nonetheless beginning to become worried. She was going so fast, he didn't know how to slow her down, and he wanted this to last.

And there were other darker and less welcome thoughts beginning to whirl in his head, prickling like spears at his conscience: thoughts that were becoming more and more difficult to ignore, no matter how the softness of Lois' body and her impatient, eager cries tempted and distracted him.

Driven into a blissful fever of tempestuous pleasure, it took Lois some time before the faint, wistful thought began to coalesce in her head that something was very wrong. That something just wasn't going right about this at all.

She was used to men who barely had time to divest her of her clothing and whisper a few, hurried and panting sweet nothings in her ear, whose sole object was to reach home base. And naturally enough that had mostly been a disappointment to her in the past. She had enjoyed making love. She was a sensual, vibrant and emotionally responsive woman who wanted to be loved, who wanted to offer her love to someone worthy of the gift almost more than she really wanted anything else in life, though she had often been loathe to admit that simple truth even to herself. In her dreams though her deepest, secret desires were no secret at all and it was these that had often left her disturbed and cold and angry in the small hours before dawn. When she awoke from blissful, breathy, passionate encounters with shadow-faced lovers to the emptiness of her bed and the inevitable return to loneliness in the darkness of her room.

But reality had never matched her dreams...at least not until here and now in this most unlikely of places and, a small rueful smile flickered on her face, with this most unlikely of men. At least...so she had once thought.

Reality had been disappointing and mostly frustrating and hurtful, leading only to a broken heart. Which was why, despite her passionate nature, she hadn't really considered it the loss of the century when she'd sworn off men for what she deemed the sake of her health and

continuing mental stability. She had simply channeled that frustrated passion into her work. And told herself that having no one to share her successes with, her dreams and hopes and plans with - her life with - was really no loss at all: not for her. There were just some women whose destiny lay along different paths than marriage and husbands and children. Some of them had been great women - heroines - and Lois was driven to ensure that if her destiny were to be one of them she would be the best darned single white female heroine the world had ever seen.

As for sex...well, she had never really been missing much, she reasoned, remembering those fumbling encounters of her youth and the uncaring men who'd followed, who'd blinded her with soft words and caresses and left her crying and wounded in the night when they'd gotten all they wanted from her. So...she hadn't really missed much.

Clark had reminded her that most of those rationalizations that had become so much a part of her life, what she had always known to be fundamental and unchangeable truths, were actually lies and deceits, simple warding charms to conceal and cosset a slowly mending heart.

His initial patience with her had been encouraging, his slow and sultry quest across her body thrilling and exciting, but now...well, she'd just never encountered a man who seemed so content to indulge in foreplay indefinitely.

Clark had just embarked on a veritable point to point journey of every erogenous zone she had - and probably a few she hadn't been aware of. It was almost textbook perfect. His determination to please her, to explore her to the full, was sweet and touching and she was certainly enjoying the attention, but...

...but, well, foreplay was all well and good but she wanted more...needed more...

"Clark - " she gasped out.

His mouth captured hers, but she sensed that it was more of a desperate effort to silence her pleas and distract her than to find the pleasure in her kiss that had been present before.

In fact, there was a desperation about all of his movements now. His lips on hers were hard and bruising, driven and possessed, almost frantic.

She twisted her head, tearing free as her chest tightened, deprived of air.

"Clark..." she sobbed.

Clark stiffened against her, arms tightening around her and then he shook his head fiercely and pulled sharply clear of her, his loss abrupt enough to shock her eyes wide as he rolled to sit against the edge of the nosecone in one ironically graceful motion. He huddled forward, elbows resting on knees, clenching his fingers tight behind his neck as he huffed out a quick, impatient breath and muttered a dark imprecation.

It took Lois a second or two to put it together. His withdrawal had been so sudden, so unexpected, that for long moments her body held the imprint of his against it, unaware that anything had changed. She lay, body cooling without his heat, her eyes blank on the ceiling above her, feeling every part of her ache with the memory of his recent touch, disappointment and resentment pounding in her chest.

Her hands bunched slowly into fists where they lay against the metal of the race car...and then she followed him up to sit with a jolt. He wasn't looking at her, slumped on the edge of the car, a picture of abject misery. The muscles of his back were rigid with tension, slabbed into a tight ridge across his shoulders and in his neck, where the tendons showed taut.

Lois' eyes trailed across those perfectly sculpted shoulder blades, slick with sweat, each muscle and hard, masculine curve exquisitely defined like burnished steel and lost herself in the all too recent memory of that body, hard and beautiful, clenched tight against her own. A memory that made her heart pound still despite her annoyance and frustration.

"Clark...?" she put out a hesitant hand with the soft question, reaching for his shoulder, and felt that heart shrivel and die in her chest as he flinched from her touch.

Her eyes clouded, desire flooding into sudden shame at his rejection of her. Tears prickled at the back of her eyes, gathering unbidden, as she turned sharply, fumbling for her discarded blouse, feeling suddenly unclean. Her hands shook as she shrugged into it violently, drawing it up around her like a shield of armor.

"Lois - "

Clark had turned to follow her swift motion. His voice, a stricken protest that carried a low tremor of apology and concern, made her close her eyes against the lancing jolt of pain in her chest. She found the buttons of her blouse blindly, through the sudden misting of her vision, refusing to look at him, refusing to let him see how badly she was hurt, how close she was to tears.

"Lois, I'm sorry, I - "

"No...it's okay. Really. I mean if you don't want to do this, you don't want to do this. Hey," she laughed, a softly jagged sound in the darkness, laced with a trembling flicker of that hurt that could only just be heard beneath the brittle edge to her voice, "it's not like we're married to it, Clark. I understand."

"No." He reached out for her. "No, Lois, you don't." His hands covered hers urgently, stilling her fingers where they still fought the buttons of her blouse.

She froze, fingers clenched so tight on the button she was holding she felt them ache, knew that if she looked at them they would be bone white and bloodless. Like her face, she was sure, as she raised her head. Her expression was waxen, smooth and blanched as candle grease as she fixed dark and wounded eyes on him.

"Yes, I do." The words emerged clipped out of the anger and

humiliation and battered pride that welled up in her, a storm-tossed collection of emotions that clashed and raged together in her breast. "And it is okay."

Clark, driven by contrition, even so found time to wonder how one woman could have so developed the art of saying one thing and yet making you hear another. It wasn't okay. It was very far from okay. He tightened his grip a little as she tried to pull her fingers free of his.

"Lois, that's not what I meant. It's not what I want." He shook his head as she shrugged him off and went back to the task of covering up with calm and lethal fury in her eyes. Clark sighed. He took hold of her wrists, stopping her firmly in her tracks.

"Lois, stop. Please, just...stop. Listen to me!"

She looked up at him dangerously, a warning flashing at him from out of her blank and reserved glare.

"I **want** to." He hesitated and then sighed again. He reached up before she could answer, before she could explode at him, and cradled her face in his hands. A wry smile crossed his lips as he let his forehead fall to rest against hers. He closed his eyes with a soft groan. "Oh, God...Lois, you have no idea how much I want this."

His sincerity was obvious, that some inner struggle was torturing him, clear. It cut through her anger like a blade. Confused now, Lois pulled slightly clear of him so that she could look into his earnest, pleading eyes.

"But - "

He set a quick finger to her lips, stilling her. Despite her doubts, she subsided.

"I'm sorry. It's just...It seemed so right. But -- "

"But now you've changed your mind?" Lois tried to hold back the small spark of anger that, waiting, banked low but ready to flare into bright life again in an instant, surged up to rage in her heart.

"No," he quickly denied. "That's not it. That's not it at all. Please, Lois, believe me. Trust me. You know I'd never hurt you like that. You must know how much I want you. How much I've always wanted you."

"Then **what**?" Anger became impatience. Clark looked away from her. "For heaven's sake, Clark, just **tell** me!"

He shrugged as he fixed his gaze morosely on a point in the surrounding shadows. "I just...I just can't..."

"Is it me? Is there something wrong with me? Am I the wrong shape, the wrong weight, not what you expected, not what you want, do I turn you off, make you want to throw up - what?! Tell me!"

Clark looked back at her, almost shocked out of his dismal mood by this frustrated babbling, "No - it's nothing to do with you, Lois,

it's - "

"It's nothing to do with - !"

He flashed her a quick, suffering look and the incredulous retort died on her lips, along with her anger. He looked so pitiful sitting there, sunk in misery. Perplexed, aware as she pushed her anger to one side that there was something deeper going on here, something that she at least owed him the chance to make her understand, she shifted onto her knees. Fitting herself to his broad back she put her hands against his shoulders and then slid them down onto strong biceps so that she could lay her chin to his shoulder, offering him her sympathy in silence.

"If you tell me what's wrong, then I can help," she offered softly.

She started as he shook his head sharply, slamming a hand onto the car as he jerked to his feet and away from her. Away from the temptation that was biting and scrabbling at him and urging him to just forget his doubts and reach out and take her into his arms, kiss her hard, and forget everything but her.

"No! This was a mistake." He stalked across the floor, scrubbed a harsh hand through his dampened hair. "This is all a mistake," he whispered again, half to himself. "I should never have kissed you like that. It wasn't fair. I shouldn't have let you think we could --" he trailed off into his own silence, lost in his self-castigating thoughts.

He was oblivious to the way that her eyes followed the tightly controlled movements of his body as he paced the space before the car.

Lois admired the lithe, natural grace with which he moved - like some kind of sleek and powerful animal, strong muscles rippling under the sheath of skin as they bunched and flexed with his restless motions. Under the faintly iridescent light from the moon outside, the sheen of that skin glowed. There wasn't an uneven patch on him, Lois thought wistfully. His entire body was cast in that one, perfect, polished amber tone. It was the lightly tanned and even honey that only a naturally healthy body produced, free of the yellowing tint that came from a bottle or gave testimony to long hours spent under tanning lamps. Sweat gleamed on those sculpted muscles like oil and Lois felt her heart clench with renewing hunger as she let her gaze devour him.

Clark gave up his pacing abruptly to run a second impatient hand through his hair and then turned on her abruptly, anguished. He found his best intentions of resistance floundering as he caught sight of her, sitting back against her heels on the front of the car, her hands resting lightly against her knees as she studied him. In her eyes, her desire was as naked and unguarded as her body was.

Her body...Clark swallowed over the sudden rock that lodged itself in his throat and sealed it tight... Her hair was tangled around her pale face like a dark cloud. She looked so fragile, so vulnerable...waif-like...beautiful. He felt his heart stop.

Was he insane? How could he be standing here, resisting making love

to her? When she was offering herself to him, willingly giving herself up to him...when he knew - or at least had some suspicions about - what it had taken her to trust him, to make that offer in the first place? The living embodiment of all his dreams was waiting for him, just yards away, beautiful and desirable and eager to be his...and he was telling her *no*?

Clark shook his head at himself. He wanted to make love with her, be with her - of course he did, what sane man wouldn't...but he couldn't.

He couldn't. And the insanity was that he had ever thought he could.

He gazed sadly at her, meeting the hurt and confusion in her eyes, shimmering with the beginnings of tears she was desperately and valiantly trying to ensure he never saw, and his heart twisted in his chest.

He couldn't.

Making love was all about letting go, surrendering control, giving up of yourself to instinct and passion; opening yourself up to another so completely that there were no secrets left between you. All of the things he'd spent a lifetime denying, resisting, trying to avoid with every fiber of his being, so that he might never be suspected as being anything other than your everyday normal regular Joe. All of the things he had bred out of his behavior in the pursuit of normality and a human existence.

How could he expect to just give up all of that now and reach for instincts and reflexes he hadn't used or known in years? Control was everything; it was the only thing that kept him safe, the only thing that kept others safe from him.

He couldn't surrender that control now. What if he...what if he *hurt* her? If he became so enflamed with passion, if he lost control so completely...mightn't he hurt her? His expression tightened with the thought, sickness clenching in his belly, a cold film of sweat itching between his shoulderblades. And what if, in the throes of instinct, reckless with passion, unthinking, all of his thought processes surrendered to the simple force of emotion alone, lost in the heat and the beauty of being so completely within her, he did something without thinking? Floating for instance...or...or...well, he didn't know! That was the point wasn't it? He just didn't know what he might do, what he was capable of. Something! Something reckless and stupid and unthinking. There were so many variables, so many conflicts, it wasn't fair that he had to consider all of them when all he wanted to do was take the woman he loved in his arms and show her how perfectly, how completely, that love for her ruled him. It just wasn't fair!

His lips twisted in a grimace at the childish protest. Sometimes, his life just *wasn't* fair. He'd accepted that a long time ago, accepted that there were certain things that others took for granted that he had no choice but to sacrifice for his own and the greater good, and there was little point in railing against it now.

As for Lois...his eyes flickered back to where she was watching him from the sanctuary of the car and he let out a slow, heavy breath of

decision. He couldn't take the risk. This had been something crazy from the outset, something he should never have considered or let himself be tempted into.

And yet...how could he resist her?

"Clark..." she said softly, seeming to sense something of the inner struggle warring in him - or perhaps she saw the echo of her own pain in the tortured darkness of his eyes. He shook his head violently, cutting off whatever plea she'd been about to offer, whatever reassurance.

"No...Lois..." and the words that had been about to emerge from his throat, the words that would put an end to any hopes he had of continuing this with her, of changing the parameters of their relationship at all, that would condemn him to remaining her partner and friend from now until eternity, lodged thickly there, refusing to leave it, no matter how hard he tried to force them free.

Unable to look at her any longer, unable to bear the disappointment and hurt in her eyes, that twisted in his chest just as though she'd plunged a knife into his soul, he dropped his gaze. He fixed it half blindly on the swirls of yellow and green color spreading around her, bilious and venomous, like the bile rising in his throat...and then he frowned.

A sudden flash of memory brightened in his mind's eye...an image of him rising to his feet, desperate to escape the soft, tempting touch of Lois' fingers against his skin...his hand...no, his *fist*...he had slammed his fist into the car as he'd jolted to his feet, putting distance between them. He remembered that clearly. It had been a reflexive gesture, borne out of frustration and anger and self-disgust. All of which were emotions marked by...

...by loss of control.

A violent motion that struck out at something inanimate as a scapegoat to his emotions...something that you just couldn't *control*, the thought pricked at him again.

And yet...

...and yet, the car was unmarked.

There was no sign of his fist in the smoothly gleaming metal. No sign that it had been struck with any real degree of force at all. It hadn't been so much as scratched. There wasn't even a hint of scuffed metal, a dimming of the bright paintwork, let alone anything more serious. In the midst of those churning emotions, in the midst of his distraction, he had nevertheless it seemed somehow, instinctively, judged the amount of force necessary to express his frustration with the situation and yet pull back enough to produce no damage. Without thinking about it. Without thinking about it at all.

/We're not talking about a car, Clark,/ a warning from his conscience spoke up in his head as it caught the faint flicker of hope that had begun to stir in his chest and doused it ruthlessly. /We're not talking about something inanimate, a cold block of metal, something that can be repaired, or replaced if you make a mistake. We're talking about *Lois*./

Lois. Yes. Softness and warmth, yielding and...vulnerable, he reminded himself again. Fragile...

All too fragile.

But he knew that. He knew how fragile, how easily damaged the human body was. He'd studied it enough, back when he'd first begun to realize how much stronger he was than the people around him. He hadn't wanted to hurt anyone, by accident least of all. He'd grown up his entire life listening to people describe him as mild-mannered, studious, quiet...but he'd *had* to be. He hadn't been able to afford having a temper, or being hotheaded, rushing into things without thinking out all the possible consequences first. He'd had to force himself into thinking first, acting second - a habit that had become instinctive in him. It wasn't something he regretted. In many ways, it was a discipline that had encouraged him to develop the skills that served him so well now, as a journalist and elsewhere and had encouraged him to embark on writing as a career. The things he loved in his life had followed on from that early self-denial and desire for control.

He thought about that. Yes, he knew everything there was to know about how easily destructive his powers could be. He grimaced. And, if he couldn't draw on that knowledge now, trust it to help him compensate and adjust his strength to hers, trust *himself*, then - truly - what was he doing here? His mind flitted back to a cool, starry evening and a Kansas farmyard. He had lain out his dreams to his father in that yard that evening, all the reasons he had traveled the paths he had, made the decisions he had, found his way to Metropolis and why he had to stay. Oh, part of it - though even he had hardly realized it then - had been the lure of a bewitching, dark-eyed woman who he already didn't want to leave, bare and scant though his acquaintance of her had been. She drew him, like dreams of home and family.

But more, it had been because he had realized, finally, that to be human he had to live among humans. He had retreated too easily in the past, afraid to let anyone get too close, knowing that in intimacy lay the danger of discovery. Safety lay in keeping on the move, living out his life in remote places and sparsely populated cities, leaving friends behind him almost as soon as they were made, never staying long enough in any one place to take the risk that he might begin to want to stay. A fool's quest, he'd latterly realized. And the life of a coward, neither one thing or the other. He'd had to choose. Live entirely in one world or the other...with friends or alone...as man or superhero.

It had never really been that much of a choice to make. He wasn't made to live life alone, apart from others. It just wasn't in him. And yet...

...if he couldn't reach for *all* of his dreams...if he couldn't bear to love with everything that was in him, body and mind, heart and soul, then he might just as well retreat from the world. Because without that love, he was only half a man, an empty shell, nothing at all.

He needed her. More than anyone or anything he had ever known. And without her...without all of her...he was lost. Dead and buried.

Something his Mom had once said echoed in his head suddenly. It had been at the funeral of a neighbor, an old man, embittered, who'd lived most of his life alone and as a recluse. His wife had died, gone years before in a mindless collision between a drunk who ran a stop light and the car she'd been driving home from the daycare center where she worked. Heart-stricken, encased in grief and bitterness, he had never allowed himself to emerge into the world again as far as he could avoid it. And he had never allowed himself to love again either. Clark's heart, young as he had been then and knowing little of that kind of love, had found itself aching over the waste in that.

Returning to the farm after the burial, sunk in his thoughts, he had been startled to hear his Mom voice what was in his head. Far from lost in romantic sympathy over the poignancy of Cutter Hawthorne's miserable life, however, Martha Kent had almost sounded angry at the old man. His father had commented sadly that sometimes people just seemed to find it safer not to love at all once they'd lost it, than risk being hurt by it again. A truth that his Mom had found less than satisfying as an epitaph to a life squandered. Seemed like, she'd said tartly, that just made no sense at all. If you didn't trust your heart or risk it, why then that grave already had you in it deep. They may just have buried Cutter Hawthorne, but the truth of it was the man had been dead long years since. He'd died with his wife and been buried with her, though only one of them had gone into the ground back then.

Clark remembered, the image clear in his head, that his father had taken one hand from the wheel and covered his wife's with it and his Mom had softened, losing her anger as she smiled at him.

Lois could do that, he realized. Make him lose his anger with just a touch, with just a look from those brown eyes. No matter what had been in his mind, no matter how irritated with her he'd been, or outraged...at her touch, he melted.

"Clark..."

"Hmmmmm?" he answered distantly, lost in the warmth of that thought and then, frowning as he snapped back to the present, "What?"

She was sitting as she had been last time he'd looked at her, as though she hadn't moved a single inch, except that her hands had crept up to the edges of her blouse, holding it close around her throat. She looked...actually, Clark couldn't tell *what* was in her eyes and suddenly that thought frightened him. She was withdrawing from him, and he felt her go, felt her loss as deeply as though she'd actually left the room, leaving him standing there alone.

He cursed himself softly and silently. What must she think of him, standing there, for so long, lost in his own thoughts, as though he'd forgotten her entirely? And how could he explain how completely she'd been in those thoughts? How mistaken she was?

To his surprise, Lois quirked a smile at him. It had little humor in it. "I thought it was hot in here," she said, her voice a rough husk of sound in the silence held between them, so low and uncertain he had to strain to hear her clearly. "But...suddenly...I'm feeling a little...cold."

Clark discovered that Lois didn't have to touch him to make him melt. His heart softened at the simplicity of that. It held so many nuances beyond the stark words, so many layers. She was offering him a graceful way out, he understood. It was cold - though it wasn't - maybe they should get dressed? All he had to do was agree with her. He could see it in his mind's eye, they'd get dressed, in silence, they'd go back to trying to think of a way out of the garage, they might even discuss the disk and their evidence and how they were going to write up their story, providing they could get out of this with it intact...and nothing of what had happened here, in the stifling heat of this garage, would be mentioned again. Though it would always fester between them.

He shook his head. "It's not that cold," he said gently.

He saw her pause, saw her wonder if he'd misread her message, her intentions, and he smiled, suddenly the weight that had been settled in his chest lifting. He had to trust her, he thought. He had to trust himself. Most of all, he had to trust the love they had for each other. There was no other way but forward now, retreat simply wasn't an option.

Yes, he'd spent his life courting control, resisting temptation, keeping strict watch on his powers. But it was that very control that would aid him now. It had grown to be part of him. And nothing could prevent it from taming those powers, his strength. Not even losing himself in the woman he loved, not even losing all thought to being with her.

"Lois..." he sighed out and for a moment he almost wanted to laugh aloud, his heart suddenly bright with relief, light as a kite on a string.

"Lord," he came quickly back towards her, "do you know how long I've waited to do this...with you?" He paused, putting his hands to his hips and then sighed. A new, sardonic tone took over his voice as though something in what he'd just said amused him even though his irritation with himself. "Well, just to do this," he said wryly. "Period. And if you think I'm giving up the chance now..."

Lois wasn't sure she was following. She was distracted by how good he looked standing there, wearing nothing but those form hugging jeans, bare-chested, narrow-waisted, the full effect of those broad pectoral muscles and that washboard stomach only becoming apparent. Boy, had he been hiding beneath those conservative GQ suits and wildly clashing ties! She shook her head and then realized that the owner of that drop dead gorgeous body was staring at her with frustration written clear on his face.

She frowned, trying to focus on what he'd said. And then one part of it seeped its way into her heart, setting up a glow there that warmed her. He'd waited...for her? He'd been wanting this - with *her* - for a long time?

"How long?" she whispered.

He gave her a somewhat crooked grin, laced just a little with apprehension now, and moved to hunker down before her. He took hold of her hands from where they lay against her knees and clasped them in his own, his thumbs running soft circles against her palms as he

sighed. "Lois," he looked up at her earnestly and Lois felt her throat close up tight as she saw what was revealed, stark and afraid, in his eyes.

"A long time," he said, deliberately. His eyes seemed to be holding some message, but Lois wasn't sure she was getting it. Or maybe, she was trying to avoid getting it a small voice suggested, way back in her head. She reviewed the words, brows puckering with concentration.

Clark sighed. He moved to sit beside her on the car, keeping her fingers loose in his. "I've not got that much...experience...with this." He glanced back at her. "Really."

"With what?" Lois said, confused.

He cringed a little, a flush of embarrassment showing in his face. Why was she making this so difficult? It seemed easy enough to understand to him.

"With...*this*." He waved a hand at her in emphasis and she glanced down at herself without any hint of comprehension showing in her eyes. "You know." He hauled in a short breath, seeming to steady himself. "Making love. Being...with a woman."

Lois stilled. "With...?" the word drifted, her expression went with it, and then, "Oh," she said. "Oh...I...I see." She was silent for a moment. Clark waited, hardly daring to take another breath as he watched her roll that over in her head and study all of its implications. She frowned. "How much experience?"

Clark let go the breath, a small sound of resignation. "None."

"None." Lois repeated the simple word evenly and then, "None?" the repetition was delivered in a slightly more strangled tone than the original had been.

"But...but..." She stopped. Clark waited her out patiently, his only encouragement a faint upward and questioning lift of one brow.

"But..." Lois said again and then, her tone turning slightly scandalized, "You mean you haven't...? Not at all?"

"Not at all," he agreed.

"But..." Lois fell back on the old standby and then, suddenly snapping upright, "But, that...can't be... *You* can't be...I mean, you're a good looking guy, Clark! I mean you are...you know --" she waved a hand at him in unconscious mimic to his own gesture of a moment previously, "...really, really...I mean you look...*good*."

His lips twitched with suppressed amusement at her earnest and disbelieving tone. "Thanks for the endorsement, Lois."

She scowled. "You know what I mean."

"Actually - "

"I *mean* - " Her impatience died and she softened suddenly as a new

understanding blossomed abruptly in her eyes. "*That's* what's bothering you? About...us?"

His air of amusement vanished. He ducked his head, fixing his gaze on the floor between his bare feet. "Mostly."

"I see." She paused. For a moment panic lurched in her belly, this was something she'd never envisaged in all of her dream scenarios and early morning fantasies. Clark was so assured, so self-possessed...and so handsome too, of course...and he'd traveled - all over the world! To places more exotic than she had ever imagined. There was that Nigerian Princess of his and probably others too. How had he managed to slip through *their* fingers all this time? Was every woman in the entire world insane? Couldn't they see what was passing them by? And hadn't there been...Cat! Hadn't he and Cat - ?

Lois' eyes narrowed. Why that lying, sneaking, conniving little man-stealing...! Swinging from the chandeliers??? In black leather, even??? Ohhhh, she was going to *get* the little hussy for that! For making her think -- ! And flaunting it like that too! And putting her hands all over Clark all these months, like she owned him! Oh, she was going to *pay*. First chance she got Cat Grant was going to wish she'd never been -- !

"Lois?"

She was jerked abruptly from her claw-flexing, cat-spitting thoughts by the touch of Clark's hand against her arm.

"I didn't mean to make you angry, Lois. I know I should have told you before...we...well, maybe we should just - "

"No!" She clutched at him as he made a move to his feet and, as he looked back at her, startled into submission by her vehemence, "No...Clark...I'm not mad at *you*."

He frowned at her, such an endearing look of complete confusion taking over his expression that Lois wanted to kiss him. "Who are you mad at then?" he said, sounding positively bewildered now and looking as though he was only just resisting searching around to see who else might have crept into the garage with them, undetected.

Lois opened her mouth and then closed it again with an almost audible snap. "Never mind."

Clark stared back at her, having lost the place entirely now. He shook his head, his air of bafflement deepening.

Lois watched him, trying not to smile. Suddenly and all at once, she felt completely at ease, the earlier moment of panic dying and replaced with a new, serene glow. Though Clark might not be aware of it - as she herself was unaware of it at anything but the most subconscious level - he had given her something that no other lover had before him.

Control.

She was in control; freed from the concerns of comparisons, of wondering if he was thinking of another when he wrapped her in his

arms, of fearing that she was less the match of others he'd been intimate with. Always before - her past sexual experiences being few and badly chosen - she had been the novice. Now, she was the tutor.

She supposed, taking a half-hearted swipe at understanding this curious calm that had settled on her, that if things were different between them, if she had more emotional investment in a relationship with him, if things were... 'serious', with marriage and a lifetime of commitment ahead of her, she might have been seriously spooked by this revelation from him. Lifetime commitments were pressure enough, without the added burden and responsibility of ensuring their sexual life made the grade. If things went wrong, then the mistakes or mishandling of delicate egos could haunt them forever after; no happy, fairytale endings guaranteed.

But there was no *real* pressure here and now. Oh, it was a little frightening, but it was a little...exciting...too, she couldn't deny that, and if things turned out badly between them, if either of them messed up, there was still time to walk away. She loved him, yes, and - incredible though it seemed - she understood, at some deep level of her soul, that he loved her too. But beyond that there was no commitment, nothing set in stone, he was content to follow her lead and she knew that. He would let her choose. And choosing was for the future. For now, they were simply two people in love, caught in the moment and living for it, with no more planned beyond it than that.

Lois could live with that. The future could look to itself...and fall out as it willed.

But first...well first, she had a little...performance anxiety from her partner to work on.

She straightened, suddenly finding confidence again. This was his problem, not hers. It wasn't that he found her lacking, it wasn't that she sparked less than desire in him, it wasn't anything to do with her at all - quite the opposite in fact. It was simply that Clark - her adorable, gentle, sensitive Clark - was a little...gun shy.

They could get over that.

She could get him over that.

Secure now, she freed herself from Clark's gentle grip on her fingers and leaned close against him, her eyes suddenly full of something soft. "I thought...you were doing pretty much okay," she offered quiet reassurance. Her hand rubbed a soothing path across his shoulder as it tried to ease the knots of tension beneath her fingers. The faltering endorsement brought him out of the self-absorbed fugue he'd settled into. He snorted. "Well, I'm not *that* much of a novice." He glanced at her and, seeming to take her silence for uncertainty, "Hey, I have dated, you know! I've gone out with girls!" He got to his feet abruptly to stand and face her as she said nothing, his tone turning indignant, his air of earlier depression lost in an instant.

Lois hid a smile at his defensiveness - the lonely cry of a wounded male ego.

"So...what you're saying is..." she said, settling back to rest her weight on her hands behind her and stretching out a coy leg to let her toes rub a sultry path across his denim-clad shin, "you've gotten to second base a time or two."

"Lo-is!"

She ignored the protest. "But you just haven't hit a home run?"

This time he could only stare at her, too scandalized by her refusal to take his concerns seriously to even offer that familiar growl of her name. Lois giggled. Clark blinked. This wasn't going as he'd expected it would. And then she withdrew the leg which was driving him crazy with its soft explorations and sat up straight, fixing her gaze on his chest and sliding slim hands up and onto his pectoral muscles.

Lois giggled at his look of disconcertion. "Just call me...Tommy Lasorda," she murmured huskily as she reached out to hook at the waistband of his jeans and jerked him towards her.

It was long minutes before Clark became aware that he was lying heavily on top of the warm body sprawled loose-limbed beneath him. He shifted with a soft grunt, aware that he must be crushing her, surprised that she hadn't protested already.

As he moved a small smile overcame him as he was assaulted by the memory of what had just occurred. Beautiful...it had been beautiful. Beyond his wildest imaginings or anything that the textbooks he'd pored over in his teens - with equal parts curiosity and regret - had told him to expect. Who could have known...

The smile grew and threatened to become a surge of pure, delighted laughter. He buried it in her shoulder instead, nuzzling at the damp skin there.

Clark chuckled, unable to hold it back any longer, and then wrapped his arms tight around the small body with a groan, resisting the moment when he'd have to let her go, when he'd have to surrender to the demands of the world and give up this pleasure. If ever there was a moment to wish that he had the power to stop time...he sighed...but then, if he had, if he stayed here forever, he'd never get the chance to do this again.

And he **definitely** wanted to do this again.

He snuggled a little closer.

Entwined with his own, her heart beat a rapid staccato tap against his chest, her breathing wild and stuttering in her breast still. He closed his eyes and gave himself over to the soothing hammer beat against his ear, lingering until he felt that joined rhythm falter and finally grow apart as their bodies cooled and their hearts with them.

Finally, he shook his head slightly and then placed his lips in

homage and regret to the soft dip of the shoulder his face was sheltered in before levering himself to rest on his elbows so that he could smile down into the face of his beloved.

The smile flickered and faded.

"Lois?" he said uncertainly.

She was staring at the ceiling, eyes wide and fixed. He put up a hand to one, flushed cheek. "Lois?" he said again, a touch more urgently.

A single tear leaked from the edge of her eye and trailed its way down one alabaster cheek. Looking down on her, Clark felt a sudden, terrifying image flash across his mind's eye. She looked like a broken doll, lying there, sprawled beneath him on the car, that blank, dazed gaze fixed inward and unseeing.

All of his fears, all of his night terrors, came back to haunt him in a searing instant of panic.

"Lois!"

His grip on her shoulders tightened as he shook her slightly, pulling her up sharply from where she lay to rest limp and unresponsive in his arms. "Lois!"

He should have known he couldn't have this, couldn't do this...why had he let himself be fooled into thinking he could? Why had he let her talk him into --

The jolt seemed to bring her back abruptly from whatever trance she'd been in. It forced a startled gasp from her lips, a deep, shuddering intake of breath as though for the longest time she'd forgotten to take a breath at all. Her eyes flickered and focused on him, coming back from the distance into which she'd retreated. A small smile tugged at the corner of her lips.

"Clark..." she murmured dreamily, lifting a languid hand and placing it against his cheek.

"Lois?" he asked, his voice a mixture of relief and concern now. He put up a hand to cover hers, squeezing her fingers gently within his. "Are you...all right?"

"All right?" She seemed to consider the simple question as though it held all of the secrets to the universe. Then she made a quiet sound in her throat that Clark considered could really only be termed a soft, distinctly feminine ...giggle.

Yes...it was definitely a giggle.

His eyebrows rose.

"I..." Lois proclaimed in a throaty purr, hooking her arms around his neck possessively and arching her body up against his, "...am just...*wonderful*."

"Oh," Clark said. After a moment, as that registered fully with him he felt a grin overtake him. "Good."

"Good?" The delicately carved brow over her left eye arched an inch higher. "Not good, Clark." She reached out and tapped him irreverently on the nose, her smile turning mischievous. "Try...better than good. Try...perfect."

Clark was beginning to blush now. Lois giggled again and then kissed him warmly. Regaining his equilibrium somewhat as he gently explored her lips, he withdrew a little to gaze into her eyes.

Lois closed her eyes, letting herself sink back onto the gleaming metal of the racing car. She sighed out a soft breath and stretched slightly, easing stiffened limbs with the languid, satisfied motions of a cat basking in the sun.

"Maybe it could have been a little more perfect," he said, a touch uncertainly.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. "It was perfect," she repeated the assurance softly. "You nice guys read too much."

He looked a little startled. "What do you mean?" he said, warily, after a small moment's silence.

Lois chuckled at his consternation. "I mean," she said, lifting a hand to his cheek and stroking a light path across his skin before coming to rest at the corner of his lips, "you read one article in Metropolitan and you think you've got us strange females *all* figured out." She sighed. "What you nice guys fail to understand is that half those articles are written by frustrated spinsters and new age guys. None of them know making love from making cheesecake."

Clark laughed and she grinned up at him, then grew serious. "What matters is that you cared," she said. "All we strange females really want is to know that we matter, you know," she confided. "We just want to be loved. To know that, if just for a collection of moments, we were the most important thing in the universe."

Her tone was light and dry, but beneath it Clark heard an echo of insecurity and her eyes slid away from his to drop to his shoulder, where she seemed to find something infinitely fascinating all at once.

He smiled and reached out a hand to cup at her chin, tipping up her head with gentle pressure.

"For much more than just moments," he promised as she looked at him in surprise. "Always, Lois. What you mean to me...it's forever. And it was pretty...wonderful...for me too," he added the confidence as tears gathered in the softly velvet eyes watching him.

Now, it was Lois' turn to blush. She ducked her head and he smiled. He reached to tuck a few strands of her hair behind one ear just as she did and their fingers collided. He chuckled and she joined him, her laughter a clear and crystal welcome in the shadows that formed a small, gentle, but enduring flame in the center of his heart.

"HMMMMMM. So..." She pressed more firmly against him. "Wanna make me

feel wonderful again?" she suggested coyly.

He dipped his head again, lips brushing at the side of her throat, his quiet sigh tickling at her skin, and then retreated. He hooked his thumbs beneath her jaw, splaying his fingers against her neck to hold her firm and then kissed her deeply, setting her senses to swimming dizzily before he released her lips.

"Lois, there's nothing I'd like more," he said regretfully.

"But?" She looked at him solemnly, her eyes tinged with just a little reserve now, waiting for the inevitable withdrawal, the fumbled excuses, all of the reasons why they should never do this again, why they should part, call it a day...

Clark brushed gently with the side of his thumb across the bow of her lips, refocusing her thoughts away from the small growing disappointment that was gathering in her chest. "But..." he smiled down at her, "the second time I make love with you, I want it to be somewhere slightly more romantic than a garage."

Lois blinked, taken by surprise. She'd so firmly invented in her mind the all too familiar words that had come before, so many times, from other men, that she'd almost heard them form on his lips before he spoke. And then, as what he'd said pierced the last remnants of that old and bitter mistrust and her expectations of rejection, she found herself smiling shyly back at him.

Her eyes though, as she reached up a hand to caress his cheek, stayed sober. "Where doesn't matter, Clark," she told him seriously. "It's who you're with that counts." Her eyes held his. "And how they make you feel."

Clark's smile grew warm on her. He kissed her gently and rubbed his nose against hers affectionately before he sighed. "And I don't want to make you feel...rushed," he said. "Security could turn up any time now," he added, as she looked slightly puzzled. "It's been a long time since their last check."

"Oh." She sighed.

He moved and she clutched at him suddenly.

"No...please. Don't."

/Don't leave me.../

"Stay with me. Just a little while?"

It seemed he understood. He let his weight rest against her again and gathered her in his arms, holding her tightly against his chest, turning their entwined bodies slightly so that they snuggled on their sides, hips and bellies melding, soft breasts pressed tight to a solid, comforting chest, limbs snaked around each other. Lois closed her eyes, sighing softly in the darkness as she nestled her face into his shoulder.

How long they lay like that, Clark would never know. Being with her, lying here with her, in the blissful aftermath of passion, seemed to have short-circuited all of his senses, leaving him floating in a

warm, companionable haze he never wanted to leave.

And then their drowsy, comfortable afterglow was interrupted as he became aware of the sharply rising sound of voices.

"This is dynamite, kids, just dynamite!" Perry White slammed the sheaf of papers down on his desk and beamed up at them from his chair. "And you've got all the documents to back this up?"

"Right here," Clark produced the computer disk with a flourish and placed it on the desk. He grinned. It was amazing what the prospect of a global exclusive could do for their editor's mood. Perry had spent the entire few hours since his arrival as prickly as a bear woken up out of winter sleep with a hangover. There had been something mumbled about weekend editors who couldn't stave off flu for just one more day and Alice being none too happy about missing out on the Sunday visit to that old school-friend she hadn't seen in eight years...and more besides. Now though, Perry couldn't have looked happier about having to give up his coveted day off at the eleventh hour.

"I'd recommend it goes into the night safe," Clark added, indicating the disk with a cautionary finger.

Perry grunted and placed the disk in his top drawer meantime for safekeeping. "So, how did you persuade those security guards that found you locked in the garage to let you just walk on out of there?" he asked his best reporting team curiously.

"Oh, that was easy. We just pretended we were a couple of Indycar fans who'd always harbored an ambition to make love in a team garage." Clark carefully didn't look at his partner as he spoke.

Perry lifted a brow as he looked from one to the other of them. "And they bought that?"

"Oh sure. Happens all the time. Well, not *all* the time, but...well, you know. There are some pretty weird fans out there, Chief, and people are always willing to believe that people can act like that. Throw in some sex on top of that and they start getting distracted by their own fantasies. They didn't ask too many questions, just bundled us on out of there and told us to go find a motel next time we...got the urge. So to speak."

Lois ducked her head, feeling her cheeks burn as Perry grunted and remembering with an inward squirming in her stomach just how well Clark had played the part of interrupted and embarrassed lover caught in the act. Later he'd told her he'd just dredged up his memory of the night Deputy Carswell had caught him with Rachel Harris in the back seat of her father's Oldsmobile and given him a stern talking to. Not that they'd actually been *doing* anything, he'd added hastily. Well, not anything *much*. Rachel's father wouldn't have taken kindly to that. And he'd been big. Won the Annual Hog Wrestling Prize five years in a row during Smallville Farm Week. Clark hadn't wanted to upset him any.

What caused the squirming was not remembering how she'd had to stand

there and listen to him buddy up to the leering security guards, but the shameful and humiliating memory of the way that their eyes had flickered over her as their cover story became clear. Watching them put two and two together and how they'd all three seemed to share some secret guy code thereafter. All nudge nudge, wink wink and wasn't Clark a lucky guy?

To his credit, Clark had looked somewhat shamefaced with it all and had tried to apologize later at having to play along. But she had been angry and upset and quiet on the journey home. It had put her out of the loop, made her feel as though the passionate moments they'd shared in the garage had been nothing more than a convenient cover story, even though she knew she was being unfair.

When he had dropped her off at her apartment, she hadn't even kissed him goodbye. She had felt his eyes follow her as she ran up the steps to her building, sensed his hurt and confusion, but she hadn't looked back and she hadn't mentioned the previous evening since. Though as to that, there hadn't exactly been time in among the morning rush of getting out their story for discussing something as deeply personal as the fact that you'd given in to temptation and slept with your partner several hours before.

Lois wasn't sure there **was** a right time for **that** kind of discussion. She broke away from these dangerous thoughts - desperately intent on losing the faint heat she could feel reddening in her cheeks. Clark, in relating their cover story, had been so matter of fact and laconic, without any underlying hint of embarrassment - as though it was perfectly natural that they should use that particular prevarication when caught by the guards and what else would they have done? - that he had gone a long way to ensuring Perry took it for granted too. Obvious discomfort from her now might make him focus more on the lie than he was doing right now, make him suspicious that there'd been some reality in the deception.

"Well, thank Elvis they did buy it," Perry was telling Clark now, seemingly oblivious to her disquiet. "Good thing they don't know our Lois, huh?"

He grinned up at his star reporter, who was trying to decide how to take that remark. "Good thinking, you two."

Lois shifted uncomfortably.

"Thanks, Chief. It was a...pretty exciting night."

Lois froze. There wasn't the faintest hint of an inflection in Clark's tone as he spoke, nothing to compare between the first half of his sentence and what followed after the slight hesitation. But Lois heard a smug note and almost imagined she saw a smirk pass between her partner and their editor.

"I - I need to go work on my notes for the Henley extortion case," she blurted out, turning and leaving the office with a sharp click of her heels. She missed the puzzled glances the two men traded at her back.

"Lois?"

Her shoulders stiffened as she heard Clark follow her. His hand on

her shoulder stopped her and she used every ounce of strength in her to keep her face carefully neutral as she let him turn her to face him.

"Lois, are you okay?"

"Sure, I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be okay?"

"Well, you just left in kind of a hurry and you seemed a little distracted. I thought - "

"Distracted? No. No, I'm not distracted. I'm just busy, Clark." She turned on her heel smartly and headed for her desk, leaving him staring after her.

"Need a hand with your edit?" he said, frowning as he followed her cautiously.

"I'm not some helpless female, Clark - I can edit my own copy."

"I didn't say you were." He looked so hurt standing there beside her desk, hands fisted deep into the pockets of his pants, so confused, that she almost felt like crying. She scowled at him instead.

"I just wanted to help. I always help edit your copy."

"Well, maybe I don't need help. Maybe I just need to be left alone."

He hesitated. Then shrugged. "Sure. Okay. Well, you can let me know if you change your mind," he told her quietly before he stalked away, stiff shouldered, taking a direct route to the coffee machine.

Lois made herself count a slow ten before she risked glancing up from her keyboard to watch him cross the Bullpen. As her eyes settled on the broad sweep of those shoulders retreating from her she felt her heart ache with longing to follow; to call him back; to tell him she forgave him, that it didn't matter, that everything was going to be okay. She ducked her head and clenched her fingers on her keyboard. After a moment she shook back her hair, tightened her lips and set to work on pummeling her story, since she couldn't pummel him.

"Hey, Lois! Looking kinda wiped out, kid. Don't surprise me though- I hear you and Kent had some wild time last night."

"What?" She jerked up her head to stare at the grinning face of the new intern, Bill Keneally. Or Jumbo as he maintained he was known to his friends; apparently because he'd spent time writing up the local interest Zoo Time column at his previous paper in San Diego. On introducing himself to most of the female staffers however, Lois had noted that he usually led with the first fact of interest and left a mighty long pause before offering up the explanatory endnote. He was harmless enough though and a good, steady second stringer.

Curiously enough, though Lois failed to realize it, her opinion of the man had been formed more by how her partner treated him than on her own, usually reliable and unshakable first impressions. Given the gauche introduction, Keneally's limp and moist handshake on their first meeting, and the leer that had never risen higher than her

breasts, Lois would normally have avoided the man from that point on just like she would any other half-rabid dumb animal.

Clark though...Clark listened to Keneally respectfully when he talked about work matters, ignored him or skillfully changed the subject when his mind and other portions of anatomy wandered onto 'guy talk' as Keneally termed it, and gracefully avoided with lithe quickness and subtlety any attempts by the man to ingratiate himself further. Despite herself, Lois had found herself able to separate the journalist from the man in a like manner, in ways that she had never been able to before. To her surprise, after reading some of Keneally's copy, she had found herself reluctantly admiring his writing style and actually, Keneally - once he'd settled down and been gently instructed by his peers in what was and was not acceptable behavior around the newsroom - had settled in just fine. Harmless, like she'd said. Sometimes, he could even be quite sweet.

None of which grudging acceptance stopped her from staring at the man now as though he'd just offered her an invitation to go check out Jumbo in the stationary cupboard. "W-wild time?" she stammered.

"Yeah. You know...down in the old garage? Way Clark tells it you -- "

"What did he say?" Lois jerked her eyes away to where Clark stood, up on the upper walkway. He was chatting animatedly with Ken Jackson, one of the newer staffers working on Floor 2 with the Planet Weekend magazine team. As she watched, Jackson glanced over at her and then back to Clark with a grin. Clark looked her way too and, seeing her watching him, smiled, a touch uncertainly, before he returned his gaze to his colleague. He nodded and said something that made Jackson laugh and slap him heartily against one shoulder. Clark grinned.

Lois felt her face go stiff.

"Lois? Hey, Lois!"

A snap of fingers directly in front of her face jerked her attention back to Keneally. She turned her head irritably to meet the new and bright curiosity in his pale, washed-out eyes.

"I-I can't talk about this right now," she blurted, lurching to her feet and heading rapidly for the ladies' room, before he could say anything more.

She was too flustered, too wrapped up in her own fears and insecurities to realize that it was her own reaction to Keneally's teasing that had made the reporter look after her thoughtfully and intently, rather than anything Clark had told him about the previous evening.

She made it all the way into the rest room before the tears welling up in her eyes overcame her. She pushed her way blindly into the first stall she found and huddled there, sobbing softly as she hugged herself tight around the sick, empty feeling of betrayal clenching in the pit of her belly.

"Well, like I say," Ken Jackson said with another grin, "I envy you, Kent. Most of us are never gonna be lucky enough to get partnered with a writer like Lois Lane. But remember what I said, yeah? You ever think of getting out of the business, keep me in mind and throw my card her way, huh? She could sure help get my career on the fast track."

Clark chuckled. "Not in my plans right now, Ken. But sure."

He shook his head as he headed back for his desk and paused as he noted Lois had left hers. He looked around the newsroom cautiously and then spotted her emerging from the ladies' room. His mouth set. Okay, time to find out what was bothering her.

It had started on the journey back from the racetrack, he knew that much. He had a fair idea it had something to do with him buddying up to those security guards last night, but he couldn't see how that was his fault. What had she wanted him to do? Blow their cover and give up the disk and their story? He'd *had* to go along. She couldn't think that he'd enjoyed it, could she?

She'd been quiet and he'd known she'd been angry and upset by the Boys' Club behavior of the security guards. He'd been annoyed himself. In the truck, on the ride back to their Jeep and an escort off the racetrack, one of them had all but come right out and asked him how it had been; with Lois sitting only an inch or so away and right beside him. Clark had sensed her embarrassment. He had wanted to punch the guy right smack in that leering grin of his as the guard had flashed it at Lois and then given him a wink, that clearly said he could guess anyway.

The silence in the Jeep on the journey back to her apartment had been strained to say the least. He'd wanted to reassure her, but she wouldn't talk to him, wouldn't look at him, and, helpless to get through the sudden walls that had sprung up between them, he had lapsed into silence, joining her.

When they'd reached her apartment, she had been so sunk in that black musing that had overtaken her that she hadn't even protested his suggestion that she go on up, get a few hours' sleep, before they tackled putting their story together.

He had expected that his follow up proposal - that he go back to the Planet and get a head start on trawling through the computer disk, see what they truly had, check out anything that needed it - to at least snap her out of her fugue and into blistering protest. Worried at her withdrawal from him, unsure of her thoughts, he had half welcomed her scathing put down on the absolute stupidity of *that* little plan. But, beyond making it clear that trawling through the evidence didn't mean in any way, shape or form that he could get away with writing up their story without her, she had submitted to the suggestion with barely a murmur of dissent.

And that had worried him more than anything else had.

She had simply mumbled something about seeing him at the Planet later and ordered him to take the Jeep. It was safer than walking the streets this early in the morning, she'd insisted, it would get him

on the trail all the quicker and she'd be fine taking the subway into work. But the command and her insistence were missing her usual fire and she'd shaken off the comforting hand he reached to her shoulder; gotten out without so much as a glance back.

She hadn't even kissed him goodbye.

As he'd watched her go up the stairs and disappear through the door of her building, he had felt her anger and her confusion as though they were breeding in his own chest. He had let his senses reach out and follow her, ensuring she was safely home, before he had turned the key in the ignition wearily and driven the Jeep to the Planet as instructed.

As it had turned out, by the time he'd showered and changed out of his soiled jeans and t-shirt and into the more conservative spare suit in his locker, worked his way through the mass of data and checked out some statistics and medical information with some reliable sources he knew, it was almost seven thirty. It had taken him longer than usual to get corroboration on certain technical and medical aspects, being that most Government and Public institutions had done their usual Sunday vanishing act. Lois had arrived at seven thirty five looking tired but determined. She had been professional and distant, keeping the conversation strictly to business and, without seeming to do so, avoiding the small intimacies he initiated. Someone else, who didn't know her so well, might have been fooled by her air of steady politeness and crisp conversation, but Clark - who knew her very well - also knew that something was wrong.

Lois clearly wasn't keen to tell him what, though, so he'd taken her lead, let her maintain a professional distance - at least until they had their story on Perry's desk and the pressure was off them for a time. Her distracted air, he had been pleased and proud to see, didn't stop her producing a crackerjack story that had lit up their editor's eyes like stop lights when he'd read it.

But now...well now they had some breathing space and he was determined to get to the bottom of what was itching under his partner's skin so badly.

He sighed and set off to intercept her. Her eyes hardened as she spotted him. He took her by one elbow and stepped into line with her rapid pace. "We have to talk," he murmured and then looked surprised as she hitched herself abruptly free of him.

"I think you've done about as much talking as you need to, don't you?" she said coldly, stalking away from him.

By the time she seated herself at her desk and reached to switch on her computer Clark was right behind her. He stood beside her chair, waiting for her to acknowledge him. When she didn't, he sighed and perched himself on the edge of the desk beside her, putting a hand on the chair arm and turning it slightly so that he could look into her face. He frowned. Had she been crying?

He reached out to take one of her hands in his and sighed again as she jerked her fingers free. "Lois, talk to me. Please. What's this about? Why are you upset with me? If I've done something -- "

"Done?!" Her response was a garroated rasp in her throat as she flashed him an explosive glare from out of eyes still glassy with tears, but hardening rapidly into chips of winter ice. Then she seemed to catch herself, her spine rigid as she turned back to her computer. "Clark, I've got work to do, even if you haven't, and I --"

He straightened, his face suddenly remote. "Is this about last night?" he asked her, lowering his voice. "About what...happened between us?"

"What?" she glanced up at him, feigning confusion.

It didn't wash. Clark's lips tightened.

"Last night, Lois? I'm not that much of an egotist, but I'll be surprised and just a little hurt if you've forgotten already," he said, the words emerging more harshly than he'd intended, from out of wounded pride and the sudden triphammer beat of fear that had sprung into life in the middle of his chest. Was that really what was bothering her? Was that why she'd been so distant with him? Was she regretting what had happened between them and wanted out?

Lois ignored the jibe, making a good show of pretending he wasn't there as she tapped studiously at her keyboard, eyes fixed fiercely on the words appearing on her screen. Clark, trying to calm the agitated flutter of a suddenly nervous heart, perched on the corner of her desk and watched her.

Under the weight of his relentless, penetrating stare, Lois felt her cheeks begin to burn. After a moment or so, she stopped typing and turned on him with an impatient breath, glaring enquiringly.

He was watching her with an air of trying to fathom out a puzzle that had eluded mankind for centuries. She supposed he was. Wasn't that what the guys laughed about in the locker rooms? About how darned confusing the female sex was and what you had to do to trick them into giving you what you wanted? She had to admit, she added a bitter thought, her partner had a neat bag of tricks to use too. For a moment there, he'd almost made her believe that last night had meant something more than - that *she* had meant something more than -- she shook her head viciously, dislodging the increasingly miserable run of her thoughts.

"What?" she snapped at him impatiently.

Clark looked back at her and sighed. "Lois, I'm not a little kid. And this isn't some college romance. I'm not intending to give you my class ring. I know that just because we...well, you know," he flushed a little and then, recovering, tone earnest, "Well, I know it didn't *mean* anything - "

Lois, who had gone back to typing in silent declaration of her complete disinterest in anything he had to say on any subject and especially that one, froze, her fingers glued to the keys beneath them. She stared fixedly at the computer screen, blank eyed.

Oblivious, eyes intent on the patterns of wood grain on which his fingers lay as he carefully gathered his thoughts, Clark continued,

his tone faltering now as the enormity of what he was about to do, the choices he was about to offer her, began to resonate in his head. He knew it was right to give her a graceful way out, if that was what she truly wanted, no matter what that might do to his own heart, but the fear that she might actually take it sent chills surging through his spine. If she really wanted to wipe the slate clean, forget about the moments they'd shared, how could he live without her? Before, it had been just bearable. Now, with the knowledge of what he would be missing, it would be impossible.

" - and I know I don't have the right...that I shouldn't expect you to...well, to...oh, I don't know - throw yourself at my feet...just because we did...what we did..."

Lois shook her head a fraction, coming back online out of the blistering, red-hot rage that had flooded into the forefront of her mind and pasted a crimson mist over her eyes in response to his words. Slowly, through the buzzing in her ears, Clark's voice, which had grayed out momentarily into an irritating hiss, suddenly began to form itself into something sensible again.

"...and it was inevitable really, just one of those things. Under the circumstances, anyone would have gotten carried away a little, so I think it would be...okay...to just..." he hauled in a soft breath, "...forget about it, forget it ever happened -- "

He broke off, startled, as Lois slammed to her feet, keyboard clattering. As he watched her, bemused, she grabbed for a pile of reference books stacked haphazardly on the corner of her desk and bundled them into her arms before whirling around.

Passing him, she jolted to a brief halt to snarl up into his face, "You are just contemptible, Clark Kent, do you know that? An unfortunate set of circumstances? Why don't you just blame it on the collision of Mars and Jupiter? The juxtaposition of the stars! Since you can't seem to find a single bone in that spineless body of yours tough enough to stand up to taking responsibility for your own actions! Still, maybe I should just be glad I meant something in there somewhere, huh? After all, they do say you always remember your first - even if they were nothing more than...than a roll in the hay! Or a...a...horrendous mistake you'd be better off forgetting about!"

Clark, knocked off stride by this blistering interruption of his attempt to pour his heart out, stayed where he was, staring blankly after her and making a fair impression of a goldfish as she stormed a path towards the conference room. The door slammed hard enough behind her to rattle the blinds.

" - if...that's what you want," he finished his aborted sentence sardonically after a moment of silence. He sighed and then glanced around him. Though none of their colleagues had been close enough to hear the conversation, Lois' body language and her angry tone, if not her actual words, had certainly carried and left no one in any doubt that Lois Lane was seriously ticked with her partner. Several pairs of eyes, which had been carefully gauging his reaction, swiveled away from meeting his gaze as those in the vicinity found an intense and sudden interest in their work again. The conversation level, which had dimmed like a forty-watt bulb, suddenly rose in pitch to its former buzz around him.

Clark heaved another sigh and then, mentally reviewing the past few minutes in an attempt to figure out what had set off the fireworks suddenly rolled his eyes. Castigating himself for a fool as Lois' words resolved themselves into some sort of sense, he slid to his feet with a jolt and took off after her, feeling the probing eyes of the newsroom follow him all the way.

Lois was prowling around the conference room when he stepped inside. As he closed the door carefully behind him she threw him a ferocious glare and then stalked to the far end of the room and dropped into the chair there, giving a mean impression of burying herself in the reference books now spread across the table. She grabbed for the nearest as Clark eyed the blinds and the now openly watching newsroom and briefly considered closing them, before deciding against it. They were already the subjects of speculation; making an obvious attempt at privacy would only increase it.

At least, he grimaced, being that there was only a skeleton Sunday staff around, they weren't attracting as much attention as they might have done. Although, he sighed, there was no doubt that the staffers who were present were certainly interested - much more than he personally cared for them to be - and would no doubt ensure that the juiciest tidbits of gossip reached the ears of the rest of the newsroom by tomorrow...and probably even earlier than that.

He turned back, dismissing what he couldn't change, squared his shoulders and headed for his partner. He put a hand on the pile of books resting at her elbow. "Lois," he said gently, "that's not what I meant. Of course it *meant* something. I -- "

Lois made a small noise that rumbled up from the depths of her chest and sounded awfully like a growl. "Well, make up your mind, Clark! Either it did or it didn't."

"Did," Clark cut to the chase, deciding against a lengthy defense and plumping for the abridged version in the hope of getting through.

"Didn't," Lois declared snippily. "I think you've made that clear enough." She slammed the book in her hands shut, slapped it to the table, and reached to yank the one his hand was resting on out from under him. She opened it gracefully and stared raptly at its pages.

Clark sighed heavily. This was reducing to the level of kindergarten. "Lois -- " He scrubbed a hand through his hair and then reached to take hold of the book and tug it from her grasp as she continued to studiously ignore him. He put it aside, forbore mentioning that she'd been reading it upside down as she glowered at him, and then leaned close, setting his elbows to the table as he went on, "Look, if you're having second thoughts about -- "

"Second thoughts? About what?" Anger flared in her face, but she retained enough sense to keep her voice to a low hiss as she spat at him, "Just what was there to have second thoughts about, Clark? A roll in the plastic sheeting of a backlot garage? Not very romantic and I'm sure you'd have much preferred that roll in the hay back at the farm, but you know what, I'm sure all your buddies down in the locker room will find it all terribly exciting anyway. After all, you

got to...to make out with Lois Lane on top of a million-dollar boy's toy! How's that for the ultimate PlayWorld fantasy?!"

"Stop it!" His hand caught at her arm, gripping her tight and she was surprised into silence by the hard glitter of anger in his eyes. "It wasn't like that, Lois, and you know it. It wasn't just some one night stand! I wouldn't do that to you. I wouldn't want that *from* you. I thought - "

"Yeah, well you know what, Kent," Lois snarled, ripping herself out of his grasp as she surged to her feet, "you think too much! You talk too much too! Maybe that's your problem! I'm going out to lunch; tell Perry I'll send in my story before deadline."

Clark straightened to watch her charge across the room. Then he shook his head bullishly and followed, catching up to her in the doorway as she hauled open the door. He took a solid grip of her arm, jerking her around none too gently to face him as he slammed the door shut again with his free hand.

"What do you mean, I talk too much?" he demanded. "I haven't - "

"Oh, stop it! You couldn't wait to tell the world! You just couldn't keep your mouth shut, could you? You didn't *really* need to tell Perry! In fact, you didn't really need to use that excuse at all! But no, you just leapt on in there soon as those guards arrived! You just couldn't help yourself, could you? You just had to - "

"Wait a minute!" Clark interrupted, furious himself now. "What else where they gonna think? We barely had time to..." He took a quick glance across his shoulder through the window and then lowered his voice to a taut whisper as he leaned closer to hiss, "make sure we were decent before they were there! I didn't have my shirt on, Lois, and you were..." he paused awkwardly and then finished in a rush, "looking slightly...mussed!"

"Mussed!?!"

"And you were the one who put the idea in my head in the first place," he added, thundering on hastily, before she could get past that incensed squawk. "So don't go all high and mighty on me now!"

Her eyes snapped wide and then narrowed as she squared up to him, indignantly. "I did nothing of the sort! I - "

"Sure, you did. 'A few moments of fleeting passion', Lois? Remember that? You were pretty specific back at the Metro Club about what you expected me to come up with next time we got ourselves into that situation." He let her go and leaned back against the door as he folded his arms; point proven. "Or would you have preferred that I'd found another dumpster to toss you into?"

Her eyes flared. "Yeah, well we both know what you did come up with, Kent!" she spat, pushing him violently aside and making it through the door unhindered this time. She paused to look up at him, face a pale mask, eyes burning like coals as she threw a last barb at him, "Pity the rest of your anatomy wasn't as quick thinking as you were!"

She took off for the elevator, making a momentary detour to collect her purse from her desk, as he stood there, dumbfounded by that and feeling as though a particularly violent and sudden twister had just pounded him into the dirt.

"Wild time, huh?"

Clark started. Bill Keneally had sidled up close at his shoulder, wearing a grin that outdid a whole barn full of Cheshire cats. Clark turned his head slowly to view him, eyes cool.

"Excuse me?"

"You and Lois." Keneally hitched a chin at the elevator, grinning. "You said you had a wild time. Last night. Down in that garage." He wagged his eyebrows suggestively at his colleague.

Clark took an automatic glance across his shoulder and then gripped the reporter by one arm, drawing him slightly away and into the corner by the filing cabinets, even though it was unlikely that Lois could hear them. "I *said*, things got a little tense for a time. We were lucky to get out of there without losing the evidence we'd got."

"I'll bet," Keneally said dryly. "That things got tense." He smirked.

Clark frowned. "Is there something I should know here, Bill? Because we seem to be having more than one conversation."

"Oh, no, nothing. I was just wondering why Lois lit outta here like a blue streak when I asked her about last night, that's all."

Clark's eyes flickered and then turned distant. "You asked her what about last night? Exactly?" he asked levelly.

"Just what you'd said; that you'd had a wild time. Not much else really. She took off before I could much beyond that." Keneally grinned at him suddenly and then slapped him against the arm. "Hey, don' worry, Clark. Your secret's safe with me. I ain't gonna spill nothing."

"What secret? I don't *have* a secret!" Clark protested to his retreating back as Keneally walked off. The reporter waved the sheaf of papers he was carrying at him and chuckled.

Clark lifted his eyes to the ceiling, muttering under his breath, and then looked back at the elevator in time to see the doors snap to a close, Lois looking small and lost in the middle of the empty cage.

The last glimpse he got of her was of the pale, set oval of her face and her eyes, which were bright and brimming with unshed tears.

The next few days became a nightmare for Lois. Avoiding her partner was impossible at the office and difficult at home. She'd given up

answering the phone and had ignored his answering machine pleas for her to at least talk things out with him, until he'd given up on calling her. At the paper, she employed every trick she could muster to ensure that he couldn't maneuver her into some hideaway corner where they would be alone - not under the guise of research or brainstorming their latest story or anything else he groped at as an excuse - relying on his unwillingness to provoke her into a public confrontation and wariness to air their differences in the arena of the newsroom, where spectators clung avidly to every word and gesture, to successfully avoid the matter altogether.

Cowards and liars didn't like witnesses, she judged his discretion with scorn. In his every action, his every word, she found something dark and poisonous now.

And in numbers lay safety.

Out on the street avoiding him was easier, despite the riskier environment where discretion couldn't hamper him. Surrounded by milling strangers who could care less about the personal problems of two reporters, he was free to tackle her on the subject. But she simply kept on the move, ignoring his obvious exasperation and his attempts to bring the - usually one-sided - conversation around to more personal subjects, with single-tracked, bloody-minded - what Clark had at one point termed sheer, dumb, mule-headed - obstinacy.

And, gradually, her ploy of contemptuous silence seemed to have the desired effect. His demeanor had changed as the days had passed torturously slowly and without any sign of her giving in to his attempts to patch up the chasm of distrust and anger that had grown daily more expansive between them. Wounded hurt had become frustration and frustration had hardened bit by bit into a smoldering anger in the face of her intransigence.

He had retreated into an icy, too polite manner that was easily the match of hers; in fact it inflamed her anger since she was of the opinion that only one of them had any right to it. *Her* anger was righteous and justified, while Clark...well, Clark was just plain sulking like a little kid denied his favorite toy. That he should *dare* to be angry with her in return incensed her utterly.

At the paper, she didn't know what was worse, that cool and courteous civility with which he treated her to her face, or the wounded, lingering looks she disturbed on him when he thought she wasn't watching. She could feel his eyes on the back of her neck when she was working at her desk, like a puppy that's been whipped for something it doesn't understand it's done.

And that Mr. Innocent routine wasn't fooling her either!

Now, alone in the empty darkness of the newsroom on an evening one week later, she found herself unable to concentrate on the files that she had sought out in an abortive attempt to divert her attention. Her mind just seemed incapable of stopping its endless, fruitless and painfully circular examination of her wretched situation. No matter the distractions she provided it with or how hard she tried to forget.

As had become all too weary a habit, she'd been unable to sleep,

unable to relax, and the confines of her apartment had become claustrophobic. In the cold, lonely shadows of her room, as she had done night after night, she'd found herself hugging her pillow to her and rocking slowly as tears slid unheeded across her cheeks.

The dream had visited her again. The nightmare, rather. In the void, Clark was standing in a pool of darkness, watching her; saying nothing, doing nothing, his eyes searing her with the pain and longing in them. Then the ground beneath her turned to quicksand and she screamed at him to save her as she sank. But he didn't move; simply watched until the thick, cloying mud swallowed her last sight of him and there was only darkness and a clenching pressure against her chest that was still there when she bolted up out of sleep, sobbing into the darkness.

It visited her often and relentlessly, that dream. Once or twice it had been Superman standing on the bank and he too had abandoned her, letting her drown. On other nights, though less frequent, it had been Claude Rochert. But the nightmare which most haunted her restless sleep, which brought her jolting out of her dreams and into terrified confusion, her heart thudding against her breast, shivering and coated in chill sweat, was the one where Clark and Superman and Claude merged and morphed into one shapeless, shadow-faced betrayer. A merciless seducer who reached out a pitiless hand and pushed her deeper into the pool, further into the suffocating darkness, pinning her there and watching her struggles weaken and fade as she screamed soundlessly and her sight dimmed.

Shaken and disturbed by the terrifying images her subconscious tossed at her, night after night, Lois had begun to avoid going to bed, fighting to escape sleep. But she couldn't avoid the nightmares...and she couldn't escape Clark.

Finally, she had come to the Planet - her last refuge.

Even in the early morning hours the paper usually had one diehard or two ferreting around, searching out research or trying to tap out their way to a deadline on some breaking story. But this was a holiday weekend and news had been thin on the ground that day, so she was unsurprised to find the City Room empty and in semi-darkness when she arrived. She welcomed the solace, she wasn't in the mood for conversation. Besides, she was used to the company of shadows these days and here, where she could hopefully lose herself in her current files, the darkness was at least a little comforting. Even the solemn, morgue-like silence soothed her a little. Certainly, it beat sitting alone in her kitchen, nursing a cooling, untasted mug of coffee and watching the sterile shadows around her lighten inevitably through the small window as the hours crawled towards another painful, miserable day spent avoiding her partner.

And wishing...and hoping...illogically and despite herself, that the silent telephone might ring and she would recognize the gentle, warm and familiar voice on the other end of the line.

Something for which there was no hope at all any more. Clark had finally stopped calling her at home two days before. Which was entirely her own fault, she told herself dismally. She had driven him away. Wishing for the moon wasn't going to bring it any closer now.

Except that it wasn't! It **wasn't** her fault! **He** was the one who'd destroyed everything, twisted everything. She refused to feel guilty when it was he who'd taken everything she'd felt for him, everything she'd surrendered to him, and turned it into something sordid and tarnished.

And it wasn't her **fault** that she'd surrendered to him either, she added, scowling mentally at her irksome conscience before it could voice the add-on accusation.

She sighed heavily and straightened tiredly in her chair. So why did she feel that it was? And why did she feel that she was in the wrong here? That she should be the one to apologize, to make things right between them again?

Apologize??!!!

The thought almost choked her. **She** was the one who'd been betrayed and lied to. She was the one who'd been made the subject of office gossip, pitying glances and whispered sniggers behind her back, who'd been the victim of a slimy, calculating creep who'd used her own emotions against her in a deliberate ploy to get what he wanted. **She** had no good reason to feel like America's Most Wanted.

Except that she did. No matter the illogic of it, no matter how many reasons she could find to deny it, she did.

Maybe it was the way that the rest of the newsroom had been looking at her these past few days. Judging her. Clark was a nice guy, everyone knew that, and apparently everyone - from the copy boy right up to Patricia Molston, Assistant Editor-in-Chief - also knew that he couldn't possibly be in the wrong here. Oh no, it had to be Lois Lane that was causing the problem. Temperamental, volatile, impossible to work with, cantankerous, grouchy, crabby old Lois! Wasn't it always?

She'd made no secret of the fact that she didn't like having a partner or that she considered Clark in particular too much of a country hick to really understand the complexities of the stories a thriving metropolis was likely to throw at him. She had **seen** his resume. She'd sneaked into Perry's office at the first opportunity after he'd foisted Huckleberry Finn on her, so that she could figure out what she was up against, and, hopefully, discover any weaknesses she could exploit to get the upper hand when necessary. Geckos! For pity's sake, what had **that** to do with corruption and gang crime? What had Perry been possessed with to partner her with a rank amateur like that? They weren't likely to find many pygmy headhunters raiding banks in **this** city, now were they?

Although, Clark **had** surprised her on that score...and on a few others besides, her memory offered up a sly reminder. Lois felt her cheeks begin to burn and quickly shunted her thoughts away from the disturbing recollection.

She bolstered her resolve by focusing deliberately on the humiliations of the past week, searing him out of her thoughts with the white-hot and blistering cautery of shame, like a branding of her heart.

The newsroom gossips had long memories it seemed, and in the blink of

an eye her successes with her partner, how much she had come around to considering him a friend and confidant, how well they had worked together as a team...all of it had been forgotten, had counted for nothing. It was amazing - and not a little irritating - how quickly resurrected and how well remembered her earlier, scathing commentary on Clark had been as it was held up as proof positive of her guilt in the current ice war that had settled on them. An inevitable result of her well-known and infamous intolerance to share her byline and the limelight with anyone.

Lois' discomfort deepened, despite her continuing attempts to escape it. She had to admit that she hadn't been proud of some of the Lois quotes she'd heard when they thought she wasn't listening. Had she really been that poisonous? She hadn't meant to be. She was just trying to...protect her...her career. Yes, her career. Lois Lane had no need to protect *herself* emotionally against any man. But, well, she'd worked hard to carve herself a niche here at the Planet, to get her byline ranked as synonymous with quality, hard-hitting, crusading news. She wasn't about to let that turn to dust under the dead weight of carrying a hack from the boondocks on her shoulders.

Still...maybe...she'd been just a little...aggressive? Maybe.

How had Clark put up with her all those months?

There you go again! Irked by her continuing drift into irrelevancies, she glared across at the empty desk of her absent partner - as though he was present and could be suitably chastened by her fury. He's not the victim here! Quit feeling sorry for him!

Lord knew, he had enough defenders at it was. He didn't need another!

She had overheard the gossip around the coffee machine - which had stopped abruptly and uneasily when she'd come into range. Even Jimmy had begun to give her hound-dog looks from eyes that censured her for the way she was treating his buddy. Lois rolled her eyes. Big surprise there! Jimmy would come down on Clark's side of the fence if the man were caught robbing the Federal reserves.

There was, she considered balefully, just too much coddling of Clark going on these days. She'd caught Sanjra Pinckmann offering up condolences only that very morning. Sanjra, who had lasted precisely one whole morning as Lois' partner a few years before, the last attempt that Perry had - wisely - made to hook her up to anyone. At least until Clark had come along. And perhaps Perry should have remembered all those failures at that. It would certainly have saved her a lot of pain and trouble.

Lois snorted under her breath, remembering that brief interlude with the blowsy, older woman. Sanjra had the pretentious, saccharine manner of a woman half her age and twice her intelligence and breeding and the sound of her voice, like nails on a chalkboard, caused Lois to wince whenever she heard it. What had Perry been thinking of? How had she been expected to learn anything from a woman who couldn't spell moron without a dictionary at hand? Who owned a poodle she sickeningly referred to as BooBoo and kept pictures of in her wallet, all decked out in party hat and sailor suit and with some of his second-birthday-party 'guests'? And who couldn't even call

herself plain Sandra just like any normal person? All things considered, Lois thought *Sanjra* had been lucky to last as long as she did. And without serious physical damage too.

The scornful mental caricature didn't soothe the hurt that finding Clark in the copy room and cooied up to the simpering creature had caused to blossom like some dark, rancid flower in Lois' chest. She'd been on her way to copy some files and had heard her name mentioned in that familiar, aggravating breathy voice just as she'd begun to push open the door. Standing there, in the half open doorway, she'd listened to Sanjra lavish her partner with sympathetic renditions of her own 'just awful' time spent partnering 'that truly manic woman, darling, I mean *really*!' with something like hatred darkening in her heart. Her vision had misted almost entirely into a crimson haze that beat bloodily behind her eyes. Just as she'd like to beat bloodily at Sanjra, given half the chance.

Even the fact that Clark had responded to the woman's attack by defending her, by telling Sanjra that being partnered with Lois Lane had been the best thing to happen to his career, something that he knew others envied him the chance of, and something that he'd never give up if he had any say in it at all, hadn't helped.

Halfway through the endorsement, Clark's tone had changed, becoming softer, as his eyes suddenly shifted across Sanjra's shoulder to fix on where Lois stood in the doorway, watching them from out of eyes that were blank chips of obsidian and unashamedly eavesdropping. The message that had been in his eyes and words had been clear. Clear even to Sanjra it seemed, who had turned to find what had distracted him and, cheeks flaming, hastily scuttled off with a mumbled excuse about having a lunch date.

In the awkward, humiliating instant that had followed, as she and Clark had stood there, eyes locked, Lois had hardened herself against the silent plea in her partner's eyes, breaking clear of it and abruptly deciding that her copying could wait until a later time. As she had stalked back to her desk the heavy weight of his eyes on her back had itched between her shoulders as they followed her every step of the way.

Lois shook her head sharply, and with it shook off the prickle of tension that had settled between the blades of her shoulders as she remembered. She picked up the file she'd been staring blankly at for long minutes without ever understanding a word of what was written within, and closed it. Her eyes rested on the plain buff colored cover and the strip of tape with its typed identification markers adhered neatly and squarely in its center and then she sighed as she let it fall back to the desk.

Her expression darkened.

Earlier that day, she'd gotten caught in one of the stalls in the ladies' room, forced to listen to Diane Kerskey and some of her equally airheaded cronies discussing the latest salacious tidbits about her and Clark. Bill Keneally wasn't the only one with a big mouth it seemed, or a seemingly insatiable interest in her personal life. What was *wrong* with these people? Didn't they have lives of their *own*? Didn't they know that the news was out on the streets, not here in the office?

Trembling with frustration, she had leaned up against the door of the stall, eyes closed, her fingers frozen and clenched bloodlessly around the lock she had almost opened before hearing the giggling entrance of her tormentors, afraid to move lest she give her presence away. Her cheeks growing hot, she had been humiliated as much by her cowardice in failing to confront the entire, infernal witches' coven as by her entrapment. Huddled in the suffocating confines of the stall, hating herself, she'd endured the giggling, conspiratorial whispers and point by point appraisal of her partner's finer features with something akin to horrified fascination. Like the spectator at a traffic accident who couldn't bear to look, yet couldn't pull her eyes away, it seemed she couldn't *not* listen.

Most of Clark's finer features had turned out to be physical rather than an appreciation of character and some of them had been downright offensive. At least to the listening Lois. Shame had been replaced by anger...but she still hadn't found the courage to emerge from her bolthole. The general consensus appeared to be that if Lois Lane really had sampled that finely tuned and muscled physique and, as current gossip had it, found the experience less than thrilling, then she was more of an ice maiden than they'd hitherto supposed, not to mention mentally deficient in several key areas.

After some cackling discussion on how happy they'd be to take up some of the slack on her behalf, given the chance, they had finally departed and Lois had emerged from her hiding place, limp and quivering with anger and shame.

Her one consolation had been that she at least knew that the somewhat detailed inventory from Tina Moran was, at least in the more intimate aspects, entirely speculative. No matter how much the little tramp had tried to insinuate otherwise to her companions.

It had taken a full ten minutes later before she thought to wonder why on earth that could possibly be satisfying to her now. And besides...the small, insidious worm of a thought burrowed its way into the forefront of her mind...how did she really know that Clark had been any more on the level with that little confession than he had been about how much he cared about her and how special their lovemaking had been to him? For all that she knew, that Farmkid Innocent Abroad routine had been just that - a routine: slick and practiced and designed to help him slither his way into her affections, she thought in disgust. After all, he *had* seemed to catch on pretty quick once she'd helped him along a little. He had been... ..oh, he had been good...he had been so...

She clicked her tongue impatiently, cutting that meandering line of thought off at the pass. Don't go there, Lane, she warned herself.

Only Perry had kept out of it, seeming to reserve judgement. If Lois hadn't known the man better, she'd have assumed the gossip hadn't reached him, so urbane was he. Although she had noted he was maintaining more of a presence in the newsroom than in his office these days.

Perry White was no hands-on editor. He had a scalpel precise sense of how much control he needed to exert on his reporters and when was the time to reel out some slack. Reporters, he'd once told Lois, were just like trout. To keep 'em on the line, you had to let them run a

little first. Lois had viewed this opinion with skepticism, since she was almost certain she'd heard the Chief use the same analogy when offering Jimmy some friendly advice on women just the day previously. But she'd listened politely and nodded agreement when necessary. Though never the fisherman Perry was, Lois too had a finely honed sense of when to let a fish run...until it ran out of steam and got to the point. Which, in this particular case, had been to wonder how his best reporter had managed to lose not one but two pagers in one day. Which wouldn't *happen* to have anything to do with the fact that she knew he was trying to track her down would it? Or that she might just be investigating that Melanie Bradley murder case when he'd specifically told her to leave it to Rawlings?

Anyway, Perry more often preferred to let his reporters do what they were paid for than wander the newsroom reading over their shoulders. Though he wasn't adverse to a little nudge here and there if he judged it necessary either. Mostly though he led from the confines of his office, while making it known that his door was invariably open to anyone who needed advice or a deciding vote. The fact that he was maintaining a visible and pointed presence on the floor of the Bullpen lately hadn't gone unnoted and had, in fact, curtailed a lot of the gossipmongers in their tracks. Perry White wasn't adverse to listening to gossip - sometimes it was the only way he kept track of certain individuals - and he was cognizant of the inevitable truth that his people were reporters; gossip was lifeblood to most of them, whether on or off the page. It was practically instinctive. But there was a fine line here that he was keen to have known he wouldn't tolerate being crossed.

Of course, he hadn't been above trying to cajole her into confiding in him either. There had been that meeting he'd called her into, yesterday. He hadn't come right out and so much as said that he was worried about her...and concerned about how recent developments were affecting her relationship with her partner...but he had managed to obliquely imply his concerns without so much as touching on the subject once.

Lois had just barely resisted the fatherly heart to heart. The only way she had of maintaining the shredded remnants of her self-respect and pride was to ensure that no one would ever know from her lips the truth of what had transpired between her and Clark. No matter who or how sincerely they wanted to help.

Of course, everyone *knew* the sordid details - after Clark's babbling and boasting to the rest of the Boys' Club, who couldn't? Even Perry she was sure - which was a thought to make her squirm all on its own, given how much of a surrogate father the kindly editor had become in her life, how much she respected his opinions and was keen to be respected by him. She couldn't help but feel that he was disappointed in her. She'd let him down, thrown all of the advice he'd given her over the years aside in one, single hormone rush, been deaf to her instincts and let the woman in her overrule the reporter when she *knew* that all that was like to do was lead to trouble. Was she never going to learn?

But, regardless of who knew and *what* they knew, without her corroboration it would remain untested gossip, nothing more, and no one, but no one, was going to drag a confession out of her to ruin that small, lonely solace. Not even Perry, who had tried to do just that.

Rebuffed in his attempts to offer his best reporter a sturdy shoulder to cry on, Perry had at least thereafter kept his own counsel. If he had yet spoken to Clark on the subject, she wasn't aware of it. Given how virulently she had warned him off interfering in her personal life though, she figured he might well not. Unless their working partnership continued to deteriorate, which she knew he was unlikely to abide.

In fact, it was his tentative offer to dissolve that partnership, if that was what she wanted, if she felt it was best, that had gotten Perry his only glimpse of the true depth of pain and hurt that Lois was carrying, hidden beneath the bright and bland professional exterior she had elected to show the world. It had been the one thing that had jerked her out of her apathy and closed down, continuing denial that anything was wrong. Lois had reacted to the suggestion with something akin to panic and then a scathing anger that had had Perry hastily backtracking in an attempt to soothe over the storm and an assurance that any dissolution would be entirely her choice. Or Clark's. Or both of...well, anyway, that he would make no decisions without her input first. And in truth, although disturbed by how much hurt and wounded pride he had seen in that flash of tearing eyes she'd fixed on him, Perry had been surprised and not a little reassured by how strongly she'd defended her wish to continue the partnership with Clark. At least...at the Planet.

He hadn't mentioned the subject since, though Lois occasionally felt the hairs at the back of her neck itch with that familiar, instinctive warning that told her their editor had his eye on her. She had caught him watching Clark too, a withdrawn, pensive expression in his eyes. But at least he hadn't called her in for any more painful heart to hearts.

Lois could wish that the rest of the newsroom would be as circumspect in their intrusive curiosity about her love life. Such as it was. Or wasn't. Definitely wasn't, she thought darkly.

All in all, it had been a miserable week and she was just glad that Cat Grant had spent it vacationing in Brazil. She didn't think she could have coped with Cat's particular barbed brand of sarcasm on top of everything else; not to mention how delighted she would have been to apply some tender care to Clark's wounds.

Not that Clark didn't already have most of the eligible female population of the newsroom fighting his corner, Lois thought sourly again, returning to one of the major points of irritation that had been driving her crazy all week - even those who were old enough to know better.

It **wasn't** her fault though. No matter what any of them said. Or how many of them took Clark's side against her.

Her eyes lifted to the arc of windows, high above the newsroom, and her mind wandered, as it always did when it sought out that cityscape view, to the superhero she associated it with. She'd almost expected Superman to turn up at her apartment by now. He was usually quick to appear on her windowsill when she and Clark had a...difference of opinion. At least, he always had before. Come to think of it, he'd been pretty conspicuous by his absence just lately.

He'd take her side in this, she thought wistfully and then felt herself crimson, appalled at the very thought of discussing what had happened with her hero and suddenly glad that he hadn't been around in the past few days to ask what was wrong between her and her partner. Anyway...she amended her earlier thought dismally, maybe he wouldn't have sided with her at all. Now that she thought on it, more often than not he'd take Clark's view when they argued.

Sometimes, he had been a cautious mediator and she had to reluctantly admit that it was often his detached, clear-eyed view on the problem that had caused her to see where one of them - usually Clark - had gone wrong and led her to offer her partner the benefit of the doubt. Superman knew Clark better than she did. He could often explain the man's actions when Clark drove her crazy with some nonsensical decision or opinion, in that precise way he had with words that made everything make sense again. Lois closed her eyes. She knew she couldn't have faced Superman. The thought that he might have spoken with Clark, that the superhero might know what she had done with her partner appalled her.

Not that she was afraid that Superman might be jealous. That wasn't it at all. It wasn't even that she feared losing him as a friend...or...or whatever. Somehow, she didn't seem to feel the same way about Superman since...since she and Clark had...well, anyway...she just didn't feel the *same*. She frowned with the realization, only now putting into clear, concise frame something that had lain in her mind for days now, known but unexplored.

There was no real reason why her feelings should change. It just seemed that they had. She couldn't pinpoint the moment that her love for her partner had overshadowed the blossoming, romantic feelings she had for the superhero. Somehow...somewhere...it had just seemed to settle in her like an absolute truth, an unwavering certainty.

She loved her partner.

Had loved her partner, a brittle, stubborn voice perked up in her head, but she ignored it.

She loved her partner more than she loved Superman.

Wasn't that the most...the strangest, most ridiculous thing?

It would be amusing, if it didn't hurt so much, twisting in her chest like splinters of darkly beating pain.

Oh, she still felt awe and wonder and even, admittedly, starry-eyed hero-worship, for the Man of Steel. But none of these were love, and she was only now, in the darkness of the newsroom, alone and hurting, beginning to understand how easily she had confused a shallow, schoolgirl crush with genuine emotion. And there was a deeper truth here too, one that she faced uneasily, with growing shame and humiliation.

She had wanted to believe that she could love Superman because, deep within her - an unwelcome knowledge that she had made herself deliberately blind to - loving him was as safe and unthreatening as mooning over a rock star or a romantic movie hero. She'd felt safe allowing herself to love him because, really, deep down, though she'd

always shied away from that knowledge, she'd always known that he wasn't real. Because he was nothing more than a fantasy, as unattainable as...as Antonio Banderas or...Zak Powers. And fantasy couldn't hurt her. It couldn't make love to her and then betray her. It couldn't abandon her, throw her to the wolves, cheat or steal from her, or tear her heart in two with its lies.

Like Clark had. Last in a long list of...Federal Disasters. Honestly, they really ought to plant a flag of avalanche warning in the center of her heart, she thought, darkly ironic. Her lips twisted in a grimace and then that self- mocking smile faded and died as it became too painful to hold onto.

The trouble was, that what she had thought was love in the past, with other lovers, she had recognized as mere infatuation in the end - after they had proved worthless and sundered her heart. It had never been like this. She had never felt this chasm in her soul, such wrenching misery in her heart. Not before. Not ever. What she felt for Clark - still felt after everything he'd done, as cruel as he'd been - was something deeper and more painful than anything she had ever known.

She loved him.

And she kept on loving him. No matter what and no matter how she tried to stop.

He had caught her at a weak moment; taken advantage of her in a weak moment, and if there was any fault at all that could be blamed on her it was that she really ought to have listened to her instincts and known better than to let her stupid heart go careering off on its own again, just like before: just like always.

No man was ever going to get through the wall around her heart again, she'd vowed. No man was going to make it through the barricade. No man. Not ever. But Clark hadn't torn down that barrier, or raged in battle against it. He'd simply reached in and dismantled it, tenderly and gently, brick by brick and piece by piece. Until it seemed that she couldn't let her heart beat, couldn't take the smallest breath, without him there beside her, within her, from where he rested in her thoughts and in her heart.

Living without him, in any sense, had somehow, somewhere along the line, become impossible and the worst thing was, the thing that most broke her heart was, that she had no idea just when that simple truth had overtaken her. No idea at all.

Tears welled up suddenly in her eyes; she blinked them clear, fiercely. She wasn't going to cry again. That man had had enough tears wasted on him as it was.

She riffled through her files again, squaring her shoulders and focusing grimly on the photocopied expense account she'd had faxed over from the Public Records Office. But the long lists of redlined numbers blurred and ran together and she found her thoughts drifting again, despite her fiercest intentions.

Stupidly, she had let down her guard. Because she hadn't known that she was under attack. She'd become settled into the routines of her life, had become used to being alone, to *wanting* to be alone, to

telling herself that she needed no man to make her complete, that her happiness was dependent on herself alone - and that she liked it that way. Prior to Clark's arrival at the Planet, she hadn't had a date in months, hadn't so much as looked at a man in months or felt the faintest flutter of interest spike in her heart when she met one...well, almost...and that had been her downfall. She'd grown complacent. She'd stopped being afraid.

And Clark had reaped the benefits of that carelessness, had wormed himself into her heart and emotions and then torn everything apart with one casual, brutal act of betrayal.

Like every other man before him.

What was *wrong* with her, she asked herself bleakly. Why did these creeps seem to find their way to her, over and over again, like a bloodhound on the scent of an escaped felon? Was there some sort of invisible scent marker etched on her forehead? A neon tattoo reading 'sucker' that everyone but she could see? Was she stuck in some endless loop of time? Like that show that had been playing on the TV the other evening. She'd woken up hazily from where she'd fallen into a cramped and miserable doze on her sofa, and had watched some moments of it in stupefied fascination before turning it off in disgust. Was she doomed to endlessly repeat the same mistakes again and again? Find herself falling for the same lines, the same lies, the same puppy dog appeal of deep brown eyes and a warm smile and...

She closed her eyes, fingers clenching bloodlessly around the edges of the paper sheet in her hands until it crumpled in her fists. She forced back the sob that lodged itself in her throat, fought against the pain that lanced its way into her heart. A heart that had begun to believe, just for one, shining moment, that there could actually be one man out there in the whole, stinking universe who meant what he said when he told her he loved her, that she was special; one man who had no hidden agenda and who actually cared.

She moved convulsively, stuffing the sheet into its file, and then turned with a small cry of hopeless rage to ram the entire package, that had proved so useless in distracting her like it was supposed to, into the trash basket beside her, shoving it in deep with her fist, cursing at it savagely. She kicked the trash basket hard for good measure. And then she set her elbows to her desk and dropped her face into her hands. A shudder ran through her as she choked down the sobs welling in her.

The most hurtful thing of all was that despite everything, despite his betrayal and the callous rending of that heart that had shriveled and died in her and weighted itself heavily like a rock in her chest...despite *all* of it, she missed him. She wanted him. Wanted to feel his hands on her, his mouth caressing her: to rest in the safe haven of his arms after and know that she was adored.

She had never before been aware of how often he touched her. Small, casual gestures and affectionate glances, the soft resting of his fingers against her shoulder as he worked on a story with her or the faint pressure of a guiding hand against the small of her back. Now *that* was something she'd always hated - she'd grown up in this city for pity's sake, she sure as hell could navigate her way through a doorway or find a path through a crowd on her own! She wasn't a

child! Yet, with him, it became something she found quiet satisfaction in. It was proprietary, yes, but it seemed that, contrary to what her hardheaded, independent self might believe, there were some men Lois Lane didn't actually mind being coddled by.

Well, one man anyway. And it was sweet and respectful too, at least when Clark did it. It made her feel...protected and...cherished. Yes, he made her feel cherished, made her feel...as though she was everything of importance in the world.

She missed his touch, she thought bleakly, again. And that was her fault too, let's not forget. If she hadn't acted like some spooked sophomore the last time he'd tried to touch her, he wouldn't have gotten that look in his eyes, that dark, wounded look that had all but smashed the broken remnants that were left of her heart into dust. And he wouldn't have begun setting a distance between them - physical now to match the emotional chasm that had already been riven into their hearts - a distance that was almost painfully precise, as though he had been given some textbook that set out the rules of interaction with a former lover and one time friend, who now was neither. How to maintain a conversation which said nothing and spoke volumes, how to avoid contact without seeming to...how many deliberate inches of distance were appropriate to set between them. She drew in a rough breath and scrubbed violently at her face, disgusted with the maudlin cast to her thoughts and her inability to shake them. For God's sake, Lane, what's wrong with you? You've never let any man - or your hormones for that matter - get the better of you before! Why start now? Why start with him?

It wasn't even as though it was all unexpected. This was what always happened, wasn't it? What she had known **would** happen, the moment she let herself be distracted by a handsome face and dark eyes and a dazzling smile. First there was love, then betrayal. There were no happy endings except between the covers of cheap and trashy romance novels. Such was the way of the world and if Lois Lane didn't know that for truth by now then she was in worse trouble than she'd thought.

Why had she ever expected anything different this time? He was a man, wasn't he? Case closed. Evidence gathered; verdict delivered; prisoner condemned to the stockade; no parole, no remission.

She should be used to it by now. And if she wasn't, then more fool her - she deserved everything she got.

/Clark's not like that,/ a small, sad voice spoke up suddenly in her head as her tirade ran abruptly out of steam and the void that it had briefly been able to fill seeped back to encase her heart in ice again.

/Oh, honey, they're **all** like that,/ a second, dissenting voice snorted. A bitter voice that she recognized all at once. It was her mother's. The realization scared her. She didn't want to be like her mother, bitter and mistrustful. Lonely... Alone...

She didn't want to be alone.

The thought echoed, a pitiful whimper in her head.

/Okay, fine, Lois!/ her scornful self prodded at her after a moment's silence. /So, you don't want to be alone. Great! So now what? You go running back to Clark and beg him to forgive you? Lay yourself at his feet? Beg him to take you back no matter what? Can you live with that? Is it a price enough to pay for not being alone? Because he would take you back, you know he would. What man wouldn't? His own personal little geisha who'll forgive him anything, so long as he throws her the odd scrap or two of affection now and then. What man could really pass on an offer like that?/

Lois snuffled, trying to block out that persistent harpy as it jabbed at her, flaying her...and to her dismay she succeeded. Because the plain truth of it was that, despite all logic, despite her own self-disgust at her weakness, she missed Clark so badly - as partner, friend *and* lover - that it made her want to scream and rail and weep herself into a blind fury of longing.

She wanted to kill him.

She wanted to beat at him with her fists and try to make him feel some small part of the pain that he had given her.

She wanted to rend him apart and stamp on his desiccated bones.

She wanted to...

She wanted to hold him.

And kiss him.

And have him hold her.

She wanted...

To love him.

Was that so much to ask?

Sitting there, alone in the empty newsroom, faced with the stark and brittle truth of her own weakness that she could no longer avoid, her face crumpled, the dam broke, and Lois laid her head quietly to folded arms atop her desk and began to softly weep. All of the misery that had been clenched tight within her, trapped within her, buried beneath the pride and the hurt and the anger, becoming a storm of painful sobbing that no one could hear.

Clark raised his head with a start as the low ping of the elevator announced its arrival at the newsroom and broke into his thoughts. He mooched out of the box as the doors slid aside, hands pushed deep into the pockets of his raincoat as he ambled towards the ramp, sunk back deep in the anguish of his revolving thoughts before he even stepped out onto the landing.

The newsroom was dark at this early hour, lit only by soft pools of light here and there and eerie in its silence. Yet it was comforting to be there, almost like coming home. That sense of warm familiarity made him realize, renewed, just how much this place had worked its way into his heart over the months and how much it would wrench him

to leave it behind.

If he left it behind, a small, stubborn voice spoke up in his head. The jury was still out on that one, remember? It wasn't a done deal. Right? Clark sighed. No, it wasn't, he admitted. His prevarication irked him, every time he convinced himself that the decision was made, done and dusted, final, irrevocable - no other choice, no other way out - he found himself immediately trying to backtrack, find another solution, squirm off the hook. And, though he hated himself for that cowardice, he couldn't seem to stop doing it either.

He didn't want to leave at all, that was the crux of it. But, in the darkness of his apartment, alone, he'd been trying to find another solution for days now - and found nothing to aid him in making any other choice.

Still, as a solution, it rankled. And the thought of being somewhere far away, without Lois, without even the opportunity to see her every day, caused as much of a bitter ache in his chest as the ruins of their relationship did. He didn't know what was worse - being here, with her freezing him out of her life, or the thought of being without her at all, of living his life with her held close in his heart and cold and distant miles between them. Each made him equally miserable. Each pierced his heart. He couldn't stay, it hurt too much. And yet, he couldn't leave either.

She was an addiction and, like it or not, he needed her. No matter whether she needed him or not. He had to be close to her. Pride and self-respect meant nothing in the face of that craving.

But...the fierce possessive edge to his thoughts dissolved back into misery in another instant, the same capricious spiral that had plagued him for days. What choice, did he have, really? How *could* he stay? This wasn't about him, was it? It wasn't about what he wanted. It was about Lois.

And *Lois* just wasn't giving him any other choice. If what lay bitter and heavy between them had simply been rooted in misunderstanding, then he might have retained some hope that they could work it out, that he could make her listen. But he had told her, over and over, that Bill Keneally was barking up the wrong tree, that *he* hadn't said anything, not to anyone, about the events in Tirelli's garage. She wouldn't listen. She hadn't even acknowledged his attempts to explain, not even with a stinging retort or an insult, which he would almost have welcomed as much as absolution. It would have beaten the stony silences which he'd become used to getting from her over the past week. But for all the notice she'd taken of him, he might as well not have been here anyway. And he was increasingly sure that she would take even less notice than that if he were gone.

It had taken him a while to put it together. But gradually he found himself thinking back to the morning of their argument and recalling that she'd been cold and distant with him even before Keneally had dropped the bomb on him. In fact, that attitude had begun on the journey back from the garage the previous evening, he finally realized. And that - painfully - suddenly made much more sense. He had put it down to her embarrassment and anger at the guards, but now... Had she been starting to question her actions as early as that? Starting to regret it? Increasingly, Clark began to suspect so.

Increasingly, he began to come around to believing that Lois' seeming anger over his 'indiscretion' to Keneally was nothing more than a convenient hook on which to hang an escape route - a way out of a situation she was beginning to regret more and more deeply with each passing moment. What other conclusion was there, with her continuing to push him away, refusing to listen to him, and acting like he was something that had just slithered out of the sewer directly at her feet?

No, her emotions were too strong, too virulent and too contemptuous, to be tagged to a simple case of crossed wires. It went deeper than that. As deep as feeling anger and self-disgust at giving in to a moment of weakness and projecting that anger onto the visible presence that continually reminded you of your mistake.

And there was no getting around that. No option but to go. He couldn't bear to stay, with Lois like she was. And he couldn't turn back time, go back to what he'd had before, and live easily with the regression. Besides, if that was what Lois wanted...if that would make her happy again, banish that haunted, wounded look that had taken over her eyes these past days, how could he put his own needs and desires over hers? When it seemed that by staying he was just breaking her heart. Clark paused for a moment at the railing and laid one hand against the wood, smoothed to a low polished gleam by generations of reporters before him. He let his gaze drift across the Bullpen below, tracing out all the points, familiar and comforting, that marked out the boundaries of his life here. No, he amended, his life, period: not just here, day by day, but completely. What was here, in this room, was all of his life...or most of it anyway. Only two people and a small and quiet corner of Kansas meant as much to him. This room, this paper...this city. It was his. It was home.

As he let his eyes and his thoughts meander wistfully over the room, a sense of cold dread crept its way into his bones. He remembered back to when he had stood here like this, thinking much of these self same thoughts and feeling the same, disorientating sense of loss, the same sense of grief and regret.

His eyes shifted to the empty desk next to his own, its nameplate gleaming faintly in the overhead lights. Then, he had been surprised to find Lois asleep there, head buried in the books she'd been desperately searching in, trying to find a solution to help him. His eyes softened, the memory clear in his head. He had kissed her. And walking away, not giving in to the soft plea in her eyes and the shimmer of her tears, had been the hardest thing he'd ever done.

And now, with so much more than a kiss between them, with the bright memories of their lovemaking still soft and warm in his mind, it was going to be harder still. Only, this time, he had the dismal feeling there would be no salvation, no last minute rescue, no tearful pleas for him to reconsider.

This time, Lois Lane wasn't batting in his corner.

That dark reality sharpened his thoughts on his current dilemma, pushing nostalgia and memories to the back of his mind. He sighed as he straightened and headed down the ramp towards his desk.

He was glad of the solitude the empty newsroom presented. The

continuing speculation over his argument with Lois and the number of times he'd had to fend off solicitous colleagues, eager to ensure him of their support, had begun to grate on his nerves.

At least that nonsense had died a pretty quick, if graceless, death when he'd refused to buy into the case for the prosecution and badmouth his partner. After he'd made it clear to certain, particular individuals that he wasn't prepared to listen to or tolerate anyone else bringing down Lois in his hearing either. And since his hearing appeared to be especially acute, no one really appeared to have the stomach to test him on it, it seemed. Not that there had been anything particularly malicious about the gossip. Far from being disliked by her peers and colleagues, Lois had actually garnered a deal of respect around the newsroom in recent years, but, still, it left a sour taste in his mouth.

Of course, it hadn't killed the speculation completely. Practically nothing, he realized was going to do that. An irksome side effect to his defense of Lois had been for half the female staffers to bestow martyrdom on him. Even in the face of the woman's maniacal persecution of him, he still retained loyalty enough to defend her, no matter how venomous her treatment of him became. Clark winced with the thought and then blushed deeply at the memory of how some of that flag waving on his behalf had manifested itself in recent days.

As for the male contingent of the newsroom...he had just about gotten all he could take of their insinuations and attempts to cajole some corroboration of the change in his relationship with Lois out of him...and he was just plain tired of fending them off.

He supposed that all they could do was ride it out until the next seven day wonder knocked them off the top of the chart. One small consolation had to be that, without that corroboration from him, Bill Keneally's speculative account of events in Tirelli's garage remained just that.

All in all, the plaintive, puppy dog censure that Jimmy had begun to bestow on him over the week from out of silently reproachful eyes had actually come as a welcome relief, even misdirected as it had been. At least there was one person who was on Lois' side in this, besides Lois. One person he didn't have to defend her from.

Not that that seemed to make any difference to Lois.

Clark sighed again. *None* of it had gone over particularly well with Lois. Most especially not the Clark Kent Fan Club, which, in her eyes, had just added insult to injury. He guessed he could hardly blame her though. She wasn't in the wrong here. Clark just wished she'd let him tell her that. And maybe accepting that *he* wasn't in the wrong either would be nice besides.

But wishing horses were dragons wasn't going to make them fly. Lois wasn't listening to anything right now. And he hadn't the faintest idea of how to make her. She hadn't spoken to him at all yesterday, beyond firing orders at him with the barest of information on where they were headed and what they were doing. Disorientated, Clark had found himself this past week working with a Lois he had barely seen for months, had all but forgotten existed: cold and domineering, unrelenting and barely accepting him as a partner at all. And certainly, he wasn't a friend any more either. She'd made that clear

enough. Their relationship had been summarily deported to the bleak and limited confines of a professional Gulag - no hint of personal affinity allowed.

Her dark silences were at least slightly more bearable than the occasional lapses out of it though. Now and then, she'd almost seemed to be trying to prod him into an argument, spoiling for a fight, and her mood would become even more bellicose as he failed to take the bait of her sarcastic zingers zapped in his direction and her scathingly voiced reactions to the opinions he offered.

There had been no dealing with her at all in that mood. But, whatever mood she was in, that she wanted free of him, that she couldn't bear suddenly to be near him, was something she'd hidden poorly at best these past few days, and let out at him, shining black with loathing from deep within her eyes, whenever he caught her unawares.

She had barricaded herself in Perry's office yesterday morning and he had had to leave before he gave in to the temptation to listen in, so convinced was he that she was demanding their partnership be dissolved. What excuse she would use for no longer being able to work with him he didn't know, couldn't imagine, but he knew she'd find something plausible. He had spent the entire afternoon waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for the summons from their editor, but it hadn't come; at least not yet. He had few doubts that it would though.

And then...there had been this morning. As they'd left on assignment, he'd unthinkingly laid a hand against the small of her back to guide her as they'd entered the elevator and her reaction had been so startling, so violent, he had almost felt like he'd molested her in some way.

He stood before his desk and stirred an aimless finger through the pile of papers lying there. He closed his eyes against the small jab of pain in his chest with the memory. How could he have been so...so *stupid*. He should have known what her reaction would be.

She had ridden down to the lobby stiff backed, refusing to look at him, pale and tight lipped, and he hadn't found the courage to confront her on it.

He hadn't touched her again either.

What had happened to them? He just didn't understand how something that had seemed so right, so beautiful, had suddenly twisted into something so wrong.

The irony of it all lay heavy in his chest. For so long now he had known he was in love with his partner, for the longest time he'd fantasized about what it would be like if they somehow became more than colleagues, more than just friends. Fantasies that had been as much painful as they were enticing, because he had never truly believed that he would obtain his heart's desire.

Now...? Well, now he'd give anything he had, everything he owned and more, to go back to that time when they were friends, when they were a team; just that and nothing more. Maybe that was the lesson in all of this, he considered bleakly. Be content with what you have, never risk the wish for more...too often the ambition to change your lot

left you with nothing at all. Not even that which you'd taken for granted and thought you were unhappy with, that had seemed imperfect and frustrating and less than satisfactory, that you would have given your soul to change and now would give your soul to retrieve...now that it was lost for good.

But still, miserable though it had made him, he couldn't regret what he had done, what had happened between them.

It was clear that Lois did, that she was ashamed of what had occurred in that garage and desperately wanted to forget it ever happened at all. And if that was what Lois wanted, then he could give her that. Sure, he could. Couldn't he? He didn't have to leave to buy into that pretence for her sake. He shook his head, disgusted with his own weakness, as the voice in his head trailed off uncertainly with that last.

He was Superman, for pity's sake. With Super-will alone he could maintain his body temperature to within the minutest degree of his own choosing, could regulate the rhythms of his body, could change it at a molecular level if he just chose to do it - though that one mostly remained in the realm of theory and the odd passing thought. But he knew that he could. And he *could* keep his hands off of his partner; maintain a friendly, respectful working relationship with her, if she'd let him. Maybe take in the odd ballgame; watch a movie together...be nothing more than partners; best friends...and he could paste together the shattered fragments of a broken heart so that no one, least of all Lois, would ever know that it had been broken at all.

He shook his head as he continued to search halfheartedly among the papers on his desk for the file he could have sworn he'd left there only that morning. Had he locked it away in his desk? He fished out his keyring from his pocket and unlocked the top drawer, but the elusive file was nowhere to be found in there either.

God, Kent, he chided himself callously as he prowled through the contents of the drawer in a double-check, talk about getting overly melodramatic! Your heart's not broken. It's just...dented a little. That's all. You'll get over it. Just...get on with it. Stop wallowing in self-pity and get on with it. She's made her choice and she's made it pretty clear what that choice is. You can't love her without giving her what she wants.

And, without doubt, what she wanted wasn't him.

Clark steadfastly ignored the sharp stab of pain the thought pricked into his heart - not to mention the fact that - yet again - despite his earlier, complete and utter certainty that he had made his decision, found his solution, a way out for both of them, that there was no doubt in his mind that he had to leave...the Planet, this city...get as far from her as possible...he somehow still found his thoughts spinning over other scenarios that might work him a way out of his current mess and permit him to stay. Still twisting like a catfish on that hook he thought he'd gotten free of.

He slammed the drawer shut in frustration and started a search of his desk again. Why did he keep on doing that? His mind was made up, wasn't it? Why did he keep on trawling through the past few days as though he had any other option?

/Because you're fooling yourself, Kent. You're not leaving. You're not leaving *her*. You can tell yourself you will till the seas roll dry, but you know you won't. You know you *can't*./

Clark scowled as that inner voice, more worldly wise and attuned to his heart than he was it seemed, jabbed at him.

Abruptly he gave up his fitful search for the file. Maybe it was in one of the cabinets at the back of the office. He left his desk and headed for the shadowed recesses of the room and then paused as the unexpected, muffled bang of a door broke the silence of the newsroom.

A quick tick of heels approached him at a sharp trot. He knew, even before Lois emerged from the ladies' room, that it would be her. The sound of the door had focused senses that had been muffled by his morose thoughts and he had abruptly sensed that particular collection of scent and breath and heartbeat that was so much a part of him now it was almost his own.

Lois saw him in the next instant and stopped dead in her tracks, the tissue that she'd been using to dab at her eyes freezing in place momentarily before her hand dropped away from her face and fisted at her side.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, as though accusing him of making a deliberate attempt to stalk and ambush her.

For a moment, Clark simply stared back at her, saying nothing. He was so hungry for sight of her these days, he could never get enough of her. His heart ached in his chest as his eyes roamed the pinched and tight expression on her face. He suspected she would be pale, if the application of her make-up hadn't been particularly expert and just a little heavier than he was accustomed to seeing on her. No amount of carefully disguising cosmetics however could really conceal the ravages of a week of restless sleep and miserable hurt. It was in her eyes, stark and glacial, if you cared to look hard enough.

Elsewhere, even at this early hour, he was unsurprised to see her choice of clothing had been careful and immaculate. He himself was wearing the casual navy plaid shirt and jeans that he'd spent the evening lounging around in back at his apartment, seeing no real point in dressing more conservatively.

That she had taken so much obvious care in her appearance now and over the past week had been perhaps the only outward sign of how badly she was shaken and disorientated by the discord in their relationship and the ordeal of being the center of newsroom gossip. There had been times when she could have walked into the newsroom of a morning straight from the catwalk of a haute couture Paris fashion show. But, like everything else about her, Clark saw right through the dress-to-impress armor to the heart of her insecurity. The smart, tailored business suits, impeccably groomed hair and makeup weren't fooling him at all.

This morning, she was wearing a knee length skirt in a soft, dove-gray with matching jacket over a cerise silk vest top. She looked cool and unapproachable, professional and serene...and her

eyes were rimmed in red, despite the fresh application of mascara and powder, and darkly haunted as they studied him.

How could he have thought - even for a fleeting moment, even in the midst of anger - about leaving her?

/Simple.../ the soft voice of his nemesis echoed in his head. /You never did.../

Clark realized abruptly that Lois was waiting for an answer and the question hadn't simply been one of her usual rhetorical snapdragon retorts. He had gotten so unused to having her address him directly, of having to respond, that he'd failed to recognize it as a simple request for information.

He shrugged. "The Tigers were losing by twenty two points," he said, as though that explained everything and then, as though equally aware that it didn't, added, "I thought a better use of my time might be to come over and do some more reading on the Millcorn file. Maybe see if I could figure out what we missed."

He glanced across his shoulder. "Except," he said ruefully, "that I seem to have misplaced the file."

"Oh." Lois looked momentarily abashed. Her eyes darted across his shoulder and then back to him. The swift, sheepish glance betraying her, Clark followed it, and grimaced as he found the file in question driven deep into the trash basket by her desk.

"Great minds think alike..." Lois' discomfited voice brought his gaze back to her.

Clark lifted a brow. "Interesting interpretation on the concept of research," he commented sardonically and then bit down sharply on saying anything else, berating himself for baiting her, as Lois flushed and stalked past him to toss the crumpled wad of tissue in her hand into the trash and scoop out the file. She thrust it at him like it was some kind of weapon. "Here. Take it."

"Oh no, Lois, it's...honestly, it doesn't matter, I can go check on something else. I - "

"No, really. I - I've got other things to do. Really," she said again, jabbing the file at him, a gesture that seemed less offering than threatening.

Stymied, as always when it came down to a battle of wills with Lois Lane, he took it from her awkwardly. "Okay." He glanced down at the file and then back up at her. The moment stretched. "Um, well..." He looked at his desk. Lois glanced at it too. Clark saw the uncertainty in her eyes and, wearily, gave her a way out.

"Don't worry, I'll keep out of your way. I'll go check it over in the conference room. You won't even know I'm here."

His words emerged less the sop to her embarrassment that he'd intended them to be than as a coolly brittle declaration. Inwardly, Clark winced at how cold he sounded. Sighing, he turned away.

"No. No, wait!" Lois blurted. "That's...that's silly. We're adults,

aren't we? We can work in the same room, right?"

Clark turned back to look at her questioningly. "I thought so," he said quietly, still unable, despite himself, to entirely stop that small bitter tang seeping into his responses to her. It had been a rough week and he'd been angry with her for most of it. Four days ago, perhaps even two, he would have leapt at the opportunity to get her alone like this, a chance to persuade her to talk to him, sort out their differences, but now the moment for reconciliation seemed to have passed and all he could feel was weary and miserably unprepared to fight her any more.

Lois hesitated. "You're not...disturbing me." The silence stretched again. Lois searched for a way to break it and found herself out of inspiration. She glanced across her shoulder.

"I...I was just going to get some coffee. You want some?" she said quickly, heading for the station before he could object and playing for time with this normal, domestic occupation, while she thought about what to do next. His appearance in the newsroom had been completely unexpected, so unexpected that for a moment there, when she'd first seen him, she'd thought she was imagining him standing by his desk in that familiar, easy slouch - a concoction of dust and shadows, formed out of her forlorn thoughts.

Now, she wasn't sure what to do, how to cope with him being there, not with her emotions so much in turmoil and so much of her thoughts, jaded and down-beaten, wrapped up in defending herself against the insidious erosion of him into her heart. It was a hard and bitter struggle. Desperate though she was to hold onto the warming flame of her anger, because it was in the end the only weapon she had left against him, it was just so hard. And harder still with him standing there just yards away, his face closed down and his expression blank with a distance and coldness she'd never felt from him before.

It hurt to see him that way.

She looked quickly away, fighting against the impulse to take the steps that would close the gap between them, reach up and brush her hand through his hair and tell him that it was all going to be just fine. That she forgave him. Anything. It was a small gap and it would take few steps. And yet, deep within her heart, she was also honest enough to know that it was also a distance immeasurable and deep and it would take more than just that simple forgiveness alone to conquer.

She busied herself with the task she'd set herself, focusing on the small, hard ball of hurt that nestled within her like some black, corrupting cancer, reminding herself of every point and score against him, every slight, every wound, every betrayal and lie, until the urge to bury herself in his arms and have him hold her was crushed beneath the weight of her anger.

Clark looked surprised by the offer. "Sure," he agreed, unnecessarily, since she was already pouring two mugs of the thick brewed java. Clark frowned as he moved to put the Henley-Millcorn file down absently on his desk. This was about as civil as she'd been to him all week. And more words than she'd addressed to him directly besides. The change in her mood was startling. And not a little confusing. He found himself puzzling over what had prompted it.

He watched in silence as she mixed up the coffee just the way he liked it. Her hand, he noted, shook slightly as she did. Coffee slopped untidily onto the counter and she cursed, dumping the pot to the hotplate and yanking at an over abundant wad of paper towels to mop up the flow as it dripped sluggishly over the counter's edge. She darted a glance at Clark and he looked quickly away, finding something to take his interest among the papers on his desk, knowing how she disliked witnesses to even the slightest weakness or error she made.

He settled himself in his chair and flipped his computer on, searching casually through his files until she returned. He looked up as she stopped by his chair and gave her a tentative smile as he took the mug she held out. "Thanks."

Lois shrugged, her expression as smooth and frosted as glacier ice. "No big deal."

She might just as well have said 'Don't get your hopes up, Kent. You're not forgiven. So I made you coffee; I was getting some anyway. It's not a Nobel Peace Prize award.'

Clark suppressed a low sigh.

Lois had turned towards her own desk, brushing a quick hand through her hair. "Um...I was looking over the Millcorn file myself," she offered up the unnecessary explanation. "Don't know how it got in the trash, I must have knocked it in there without realizing it, you know these desks aren't so big, have you noticed that? You get more than a file or two on there and suddenly you're jogging things around with your elbows when you type and when you add in some accessories or two, you know, like disk boxes and...and pencil cups," she picked up an example of the offending object and waved it at him, before letting it drop to the desk again. "...well it just gets more and more...well, anyway, I just got in some new figures on Millcorn and Colin faxed me some background stuff on Mark Henley just now. He was surprised to hear from me at this time in the morning, but then I was surprised to find him still at the office too, not that people don't work at this time of the morning, but usually they don't take calls too, you know, I mean I know *I* don't because it's just so annoying when you're trying to catch up on work when it's quiet and...well, there's no distractions really are there...well, not usually - at least sometimes there are...and you're trying to think and then this phone is ringing in your ear and, personally, I just turn the ringer off and that seems to..."

She trailed off and seemed hardly aware that she'd done so as she stared blankly at the mess of paperwork on her desk. After a second or so, she came to sudden life again, like an automaton that had wound down and been sparked back into action and continued, "Well anyway, its all there, if you want to go through it. I...I...have a headache. I think I'll just head on home. If you find anything...you can -- "

She broke off.

/...call me./

The words lingered heavily in the air between them, just as though

they'd been spoken. Her eyes, which had flickered upwards to meet his, their expression clouded and uncertain, darted away again. The high color in her cheeks deepened. She bent quickly to scoop up her coat and purse.

Impulsively, Clark stretched over and put out a hand, resting it on her sleeve. It stopped her cold. Her fingers clenched against the wool collar of her coat and the hard contours of the chair back beneath it.

"Why don't we go over it together?"

"Clark - "

"No, I mean it. You've already gone over all this new information, it'll take me hours just to catch up. You can bring me up to speed and we can take a look at the file - "

He saw the struggle in her face, the desire to flee warring against her professionalism and need to get out the story they both knew was waiting for them, buried somewhere among the clutter of paperwork and files on her desk. He knew that he'd won when he felt the arm he held relax a little beneath his fingers. Still, the victory was a hollow one when the only trick he could pull to persuade her to stay in the same room as him - alone - was to dangle the carrot of a take in front of the reporter that lurked within her.

Lois kept her eyes on her fingers as she watched herself pry them loose of the coat. "Okay," she quietly acquiesced. She darted a quick, mulish glance at him. "We stick to the story though. Right?"

"Just the story," Clark agreed, trying to inject some lightness into his tone with the reassurance. He meant it too. He'd no more desire to get into a discussion of their personal life than she apparently had. "I swear."

Lois deliberated on it another second or so. Then she nodded. "Okay," she said again. She slipped into the chair without another word or glance at him and handed him a set of fax sheets.

"Bank records for the Board of Directors of Millcorn," she said.

Clark hesitated and then pulled up a chair alongside her and began to study the fax as she called up her notes on her computer.

They spent the next hour immersed in the files, both of them so distant and businesslike, their conversation sparse and so rigidly precise and focused, that it hurt Clark to watch her. He had no idea how *she* felt, being this close and yet so far apart. As usual nothing showed in the bland mask of her face and her voice - that sweet, velvet voice he remembered calling out his name in breathless ecstasy - was coolly professional, without a hint that his presence was disturbing her one iota.

If he had been any normal man, her dissembling might have fooled Clark and she might have gotten away with the subterfuge - but he wasn't. He could hear how fast and uneven a beat her heart was drumming against her ribs. He could feel the heat rising from her as

her uneasiness grew. He wanted to reach out and reassure her, to make it all right, but he just didn't know how. He'd spent most of his adult life knowing the right words to use to get himself heard, to vocalize his feelings and emotions...and this one woman could make him as tongue-tied and helpless as a two year old.

And the walls she still held firm between them were made of plate steel so thick even he couldn't tear a way through.

Watching her obliquely when he thought she wasn't paying attention, he couldn't help but remember the last time they had been alone together like this, in the midst of calm silence and warm shadows, huddled over a flickering computer screen, working on a story...and where that had lead them. His mind filled with the sweet memories of making love to her, how soft she'd been in his arms, the glow of moonlight on her hair...in his mind's eye he saw her sitting on the edge of the desk in Tirelli's garage, teasing him, confident and sexy and smiling that diamond watt smile at him that lit up her eyes.

She could hold so many expressions and thoughts in her eyes. Clark had only been able to understand fully the long-held theory of poets that they were the windows to the soul when he'd met Lois. In that dark, obsidian gaze he saw so many things, was privy to so many of her emotions. Or had been. Now they were shuttered against him, and her feelings a blank canvas again, only the unconscious, physiological reactions of her body to his close proximity a testament to how she felt about him. And that was hardly comforting. You couldn't turn off emotions or sexual attraction. They were independent of your feelings and often in direct conflict with them. If he had had any doubts that Lois was attracted to him physically, they had been dispelled back in that garage. But the body could easily crave what the heart despised. That she was aroused by him meant nothing in the end. It wasn't her body that he wanted - well...not entirely. It was her heart. It was her. All of her. That brilliant, capricious, sharp as a blade mind, that soft doe-eyed look she'd reserved solely for him, the feel of her in his arms, trusting and warm...

The computer bleeped and he came back to reality with a jerk as he became aware that he was sitting there, eyes blank on her profile, a sloppy smile spreading on his face. He frowned, held back a sigh, and glanced back at the screen, where Lois had begun scrolling through witness statements.

"Whoa - wait!"

"Huh?" Lois started slightly and he took a second to wonder just how intent her attention had been on what she was doing. There had been a faraway glaze in her eyes as though she was lost in her own thoughts, just as he had been. But it was gone now as she turned her head to view him. "What?"

"What was that? Back there in Brenda Fine's statement to the police? Did she say she met Henley in that bar at ten thirty on the Thursday evening? She was working late at the office till nine and then she headed downtown, isn't that right?"

"I didn't see anything. So what if she did?" Lois added, slightly hostile at the interruption.

"Well that was the eighteenth. Wasn't it?" Clark glanced at her for confirmation.

"Well, yeah - "

"But that was the night that tanker overturned at the junction of Miller and Tenth. Right? There was a three vehicle pileup - "

"Yes, that's right." Lois nodded. "Superman cleaned up the mess and Perry was mad at Brian because he was drinking with his racquetball buddies in Patterson's, right there at the scene, but he didn't have his camera with him, so he missed the scoop... " She paused and Clark saw the same speculation that had tugged at him a moment earlier suddenly catch on fire in her eyes. "Yes," she repeated a little more thoughtfully. "So - "

"So, there's no way Brenda got from Millcorn's head office all the way downtown for ten thirty. Any other evening, sure. But not that night. That junction was a mess right up until eleven fifteen at least. That entire three block area was closed to traffic - "

" - there was that ambulance stuck in the middle of the crush, two blocks down, couldn't get anywhere. It had that old man on board, heart attack victim. They radioed out that he was flat-lining. Superman flew them out to St. Luke's. Without him the old man would have died, because the crew knew there was no *way* they were getting out of there under their own steam..."

There was a charged pause.

"Brenda's Henley's only alibi," Lois said, voicing his own thought.

Clark nodded, eagerly. "Here, go back. To where she was talking about the bar. And Henley."

Enthused now, sensing the break they'd been looking for suddenly within reach, Clark reached out without thinking and placed an impatient hand over hers to guide the mouse she was holding.

It was a move he'd made more times than he could count in the past; it meant nothing.

It meant everything.

And it was a touch too close to the heart. For both of them.

Lois stiffened as soon as she felt his fingers settle over hers, the sudden animation that had taken over her face doused in an instant as that familiar mask of remote ice he'd been seeing all week dropped back over her expression, leaving it blank and guarded.

Clark grew still in the same instant. His gaze pulled away from the screen to light briefly on her suddenly taut face before it dropped down to where his hand covered hers. There was a moment of silence - static and endless as though time had frozen with them - when neither of them moved and then, almost as though they moved to their own agenda, Clark watched his fingers tighten their grip, enclosing hers within their circle. Beneath his, they felt so cold. Was she cold? A

soft shiver ran through her as though in answer to the question.

"Clark - " His name was a tremulous protest on her lips, a command to leave be, they were here to work, nothing more...but it held little conviction, its strength somehow lost somewhere between the thought and the voicing of it.

Clark ignored it. His fingers moved, flexing and spreading, glorying in the feel of silk beneath them, his thumb running soft circles against the back of her knuckles.

Lois swallowed deliberately and tugged her fingers clear from under his, but her relief as he let her was short-lived. Her second attempt to dissuade him was lost, barely heard, broken on a small, incoherent whisper as Clark, seemingly engrossed now, almost as though he'd forgotten she was there at all, reached out and watched himself recapture her hand, wrap it in his, folding those slim fingers into his grip. Within the enclosure of his larger hands, hers was almost lost entirely.

His gaze intent and fascinated, he pulled their entwined fingers closer to lay against his chest. Finally, he lifted his eyes to fix them on hers, seeming to measure the dismay there.

He freed a hand, keeping her fingers trapped tight within the other, and put it softly to her cheek, feeling the heated flush of her discomfort hot against the pads of his fingertips. He pressed them closer and then slid the hand across the sharp bone of her cheek and into the dark mass of her hair. His eyes, deep and soulful, were drowning pools. His thumb caressed a tender path across the line of her jaw.

"Lois..." he murmured. "Sweetheart..."

He shook his head, unable to express more clearly than that what was in his heart, what he felt for her welling up in him and choking him with its intensity...hoping she could find it in his eyes, in the whispered endearment, that she could open her heart and really *see*...see what she was to him, all that she was to him, know how much he loved her, how he hated to see her hurting like this, how much he wanted to make things right. How much he wanted to return to a dimly lit and muggy garage and the warmth and love that had existed there between them.

Proof positive that Lois had been as struck by the similarity of their present situation as he had been, by how much the shadowed, silent newsroom had brought back memories of that night one week before - though not of the kind that Clark would have welcomed, had he truly understood in that moment what was in her mind - was provided an instant later as he watched the deeply expressive eyes of his partner begin to fill and overflow. Tears spilled across her cheeks, their moisture warm against his fingers, and then her face crumpled, like the slow demolition of ancient walls.

It suddenly occurred to Clark that he should kiss her. Her lips drew him. He bent his head...

"You...sick...twisted -- !"

"Huh...?"

He pulled back abruptly in the instant before their lips touched as that low and lethal voice broke the charged, electric silence that enveloped them, his eyes showing his confusion as they darted upwards to catch hers.

Lois moved convulsively, startling him as she shoved away the hand at her cheek and surged to her feet all in one furious motion. She grabbed at her coat, sobbing wildly now, hurt and anger heaving in her chest and gnawing at her ribs as she snatched up her purse and headed for the stairs in a headlong dash.

"Lois!"

Clark caught up to her before she reached them.

"Lois - wait!"

He grabbed at her arm, pulling her to an abrupt stop when she ignored that frantic calling of her name a second time.

"Lois, for pity's sake, will you just stop and listen to - "

His eyes widened. He should have known that Lois Lane wouldn't adhere to the simple, indisputable laws of the universe. When someone who was stronger than you took hold on your arm and pulled you to a halt, you stopped. That was a basic universal rule as far as Clark was concerned. You stopped. And you listened. Because you recognized that you had no choice in the matter.

What you *didn't* do was use the fulcrum of that grip to whip around faster than a cobra with its tail in a knot, relying on its momentum and support to steady you as you aimed your fist in a roundhouse sweep for the skull of the guy holding onto you with all the force you could muster.

Which, considering that this was one small, fragile-boned female here, was actually looking to be quite considerable.

He had the suspicion that it would feel pretty considerable too, should it ever get the chance to connect, super powers notwithstanding.

"Whoa - !"

Clark ducked, with an instinct for self-preservation that took little account of those super powers when the chips were down. He heard the swoosh of her fist pass through the air just inches away from his right ear and then Lois had taken advantage of his distraction to tear herself free.

As he straightened, completely at a loss now, she backpedaled rapidly away, gaining distance and yelling at him all the while, a furious, blistering tirade that hardly made any sense at all.

"What the hell is *wrong* with you? Once wasn't enough? What - your buddies are getting bored with the same old details? You need fresh material?"

Clark sighed. "Lois - "

"I can't **believe** you had the nerve to try that one again! Damn you, you're all the same, aren't you? Every damn one of you! What is it - you get training at some school for lounge lizards?! Well, you made a big mistake this time, Farmboy! I can walk **out** of **this** room! You forgot to arrange the lock-in this time around!"

He eyed her. "Well, I **could**," he said blandly, making a valiant stab at humor in an attempt to derail her fury. Heck, it had worked before. Right? "If you're amenable to it."

Big mistake. He winced as he saw the flare of heat in his partner's eyes rocket her anger up another eight hundred degrees. Okay - strike plan one. So much for humor.

"Why you - ! With **you**? Hah! Forget it, Huckleberry! I'd rather be locked in with a...a one-legged, one-eyed...Mongolian...dwarf!" Lois raged - not entirely coherently.

As Clark stood there, momentarily flummoxed into silence by the image that one conjured up in his head - not least because he had actually once met a Mongolian beggar of somewhat small stature who otherwise hadn't entirely been that far removed from Lois' description - she tossed her purse and coat onto a nearby, convenient desk and squared up to him.

"Or did Bill Keneally bet you you couldn't get a rematch? Is that it? Huh? That's it, isn't it? Well, come on then! You want a rematch? I'll give you a rematch, buster! Get 'em up!"

"What?!" Clark blurted, open mouthed now and following her in blank astonishment as she backed up further, wobbling slightly on her low heels, which were not designed for fancy footwork. Her hands came up defensively before her as she dropped into a fighter's crouch, fists bobbing in the air between them. Her eyes narrowed as he stood there.

"Well, come on! What you waiting for?" she challenged him derisively again. "Scared?"

"Scared?!" Clark couldn't help it, a burst of laughter escaped him at the notion. It cut off abruptly as Lois' face changed, her expression darkening, her eyes a curious blending of ice and fire. Oh-oh. Bad move.

"Lois - " He shook his head. "Look..." he paused, frustrated as she bobbed and weaved in front of him, jabbing the air between them with some degree of skill and not a little lithe grace which distracted him entirely as his eyes followed the sinuous motions of her body with something less than battle suddenly on his mind, though what **was** on his mind would be just as physical and as much a close contact sport.

He sighed again, heavily. "Lois...stop it. You're being ridiculous!"

Lois' eyes hardened as she abruptly dropped the defensive posture she'd taken up to scowl at him. "Don't tell me - you don't want to **hurt** me, right?"

Clark made a grimace of agreement, his expression touched with genuine surprise that she could even consider asking the question. "Sure*, I don't want to - "

"Why not?" she threw at him viciously, arching a coolly contemptuous brow at him. "At least this way's more honest than the last time you did!"

Clark glared at her. A cheap shot in his opinion. "Okay! Fine!" he held up defeated hands, "You win, Lois. Okay? Happy now?" He turned his back on her, irritated, and headed for his desk. "You don't want to talk things out sensibly, then fine! But I am *not* playing these stupid games with you! I've had it!" He grabbed for the coat tossed over the back of his chair. "If you want any help writing up the story then call me at home, but right now I'm out of -- "

An explosive growl interrupted him, he heard Lois move, and something, some flickering sense of motion at the edge of his vision, warned him. He dropped the coat back, instinctively keeping his hands free, and turned sharply in time to see Lois' recently discarded coffee mug come hurtling at him. Her aim was off - it hit the wall behind him and shattered in an implosion of ceramic shards, splattering lukewarm coffee against his shoulder.

He'd turned his head to follow its flight in open-mouthed astonishment - and in doing so almost missed the second mug - his own - as it launched itself out of the shadows. It skimmed by as he stood there, transfixed, and suffered a similar fate to its predecessor.

"Lois!"

"You cheap, low-down, slimy son of a cross-eyed toad! You, you - aarrggghh!"

Lois glanced wildly around her with that screech of pure frustration and her eyes fell on a handy pencil cup. She scooped it quickly into her hand and drew back her arm.

"Lois!" Clark recovered some of his poise and threw out a commanding finger at her. "Lois, don't you dare throw that at - Lois!"

The plastic cylinder missed him by a closer margin than either of the mugs had. Incredulous, Clark turned his head again to watch it hit the wall in a spray of pencils and pens. An eraser bounced with force against the paint and did a jittering skim across the file cabinets before disappearing down behind them.

"Are you crazy?" he said, turning back, hands rising to his hips as he confronted her. "If I wasn't Su - uh, I mean, that almost took my head off!"

"Yeah? Well, *almost* ain't quite good enough!" Lois spat. She followed the container with something more startling. His nameplate. It flashed before his eyes and, not caring to complicate matters further by having to explain his lack of concern should it hit him, Clark took the easy way out and dodged hastily out of its path. It clipped his shoulder and spun off to clatter against the cabinets.

"Ow..." Clark said, somewhat unconvincingly, but Lois was barely paying attention anyway. She'd run out of ammunition temporarily and was on a frenzied hunt for more missiles.

"Okay..." In that moment of calm, Clark tried a new tone, soothing and persuasive as he held up placating hands. It was the sort of tone that Superman usually adopted when facing down escaped lunatics who were threatening to leap from buildings or step out into rush hour traffic. "Why don't we just calm down and - "

Lois flashed him a blazing look that just **dared** him to try that pseudo- psychology BS on her again and see what it got him and then, with a cry of satisfaction, found herself a new projectile.

"Oh no - **No*!*" Clark had had enough. He leapt forward, rushing her before she could let fly with the desk calendar she'd found, wrenching it from her as he propelled her backwards until she came up against the edge of the desk behind her with a soft thump. Clamping his fingers tight enough around her wrists to restrain her but gentle enough that later, to her surprise, she wouldn't find so much as a bruise marring her skin, he dragged her arms down and behind her back, using his weight against her to pin her in place. Lois struggled wildly, but he didn't relax his grip and after a moment she subsided, panting harshly as her outraged eyes met his.

Clark gave her a moment to recognize that she was trapped before he said peaceably, "Okay. Can we **talk** about this now?"

"Talk! Why you - " She kicked out at him viciously and he simulated a pained groan as her heel raked his shin. " - let me go! Right now! I'll lodge a complaint for harassment!"

"No, you won't. And explain why I had to defend myself against a madwoman? And no way. Not until you promise to stop throwing half the office at me," Clark insisted calmly, ignoring her writhing and furious splutters.

Lois scowled...and then relaxed in his capturing grip, letting her head drop until her forehead rested against the front of his shirt. She took a slow breath and then tossed her head, flipping her hair out of her eyes as she stared up into his enquiring face. "Okay," she agreed calmly.

"Okay?" he frowned, searching her face suspiciously. "You promise?"

She gave him a tight nod.

"Out loud," Clark said, warily.

She sighed. "Okay, okay, I promise! All right? I won't throw anything else. Satisfied?"

Clark took a moment to consider it. Lois raised a brow at him as though challenging him to even dare to suggest that she was lying and earn himself another notch on her (growing) list of Things To Hate Clark For.

"Okay." He let her go cautiously and stepped back a dubious pace,

watching her carefully. Released, Lois stiffened her shoulders, tugged sharply at the edges of her jacket and then grabbed savagely at a heavy oak in-tray lying on the desk.

Clark saw it coming, but there wasn't a lot he could do about it. Except take the split second he had before she slammed it into his ribs to adjust the molecular density of his stomach muscles to something just a shade closer to human so that she wouldn't suffer whiplash on the rebound.

The empty tray hit him solidly, much as it would have any normal guy. Clark hastily hid his smug grin at his success in the middle of a pretty convincing explosion of air from his lungs. He folded as he clutched out at the desk for support and then let himself fall to his knees, arms coming up to cradle what should be an aching stomach, in much the same way as he'd seen Chip Minolta double up just that very evening in much the same way as he'd seen Chip Minolta double up just that very evening after a particularly impressive throw from the Tigers' quarterback sent the ball flying down the field and into his lower belly like a Exocet missile.

Privately, he congratulated himself on his acting skills as he heard Lois sniff in haughty satisfaction. He watched her out of the corner of his eye as she whirled around on one heel and headed for the stairs, pausing only to drop the wooden tray delicately and with careful precision to the desk again as she passed it, before dusting off her hands in a showy gesture of self-congratulation.

Well, at least she'd stuck to her promise and hadn't thrown it, Clark considered dryly and then ducked his head again and groaned loudly as he caught Lois' swift backwards glance in his direction.

With any luck she'd get out of here pretty quickly and then he could give up this dumb position, he thought. And start thinking what his next move was going to be. He sighed. Maybe it was time to bring in Superman after all. He hadn't wanted to take that option, for one thing it seemed a pretty cowardly way to persuade her into talking to him, like getting big brother to fight your playground battles for you, and, for another, he was somehow uneasy about being that close to Lois in his superhero guise, now that his own relationship with her had taken an unexpected turn into physical consummation. It just didn't sit right with him these days, having her moon all over him in the Suit. Although, curiously, now that he thought on it, Lois had been remarkably reticent over the past week in her usual cheerleading comments whenever Superman made an appearance on the bank of Planet monitors. He guessed maybe she'd had too much on her mind. She needed all her attention for ragging on him.

But...well, maybe she'd listen to *him*. The Man of Steel. She certainly wouldn't throw anything at him. Well...he didn't think she would anyway. And at least, if she did, he wouldn't have to duck around playing charades to ensure she didn't cotton on to the fact that her tantrum wasn't having any effect.

Certainly, regardless, Superman was going to have to trail her back to her apartment, he considered with a frown. Mad as she was right now, he didn't trust her to get there in one piece on her own. Had she brought the Jeep? There was no way he was letting her drive home in that mood! Angry as she was she'd run every stop light from here to Carter Avenue and probably take out a few old ladies along the

way. No...soon as those elevator doors closed he was out of here. Superman would be down in the parking level waiting on her when she arrived. He'd offer her a lift.

He tried to ignore the small, sly thought at the back of his head that queried whether this plan was borne out of a real concern for public safety...or whether he was motivated more by just how good it would feel to have Lois in his arms again, to go flying with her...just once. Even if it was by proxy.

He sighed.

Up on the upper level and oblivious to her partner's plans, Lois steamed in furious silence and jabbed her finger at the elevator button for the fourth time in as many seconds before folding her arms tight across her breasts. One foot tapped an intermittent Morse code of frustration and fury on the wooden floor. The elevator proved slow to answer her impatience, not knowing what it was risking in its tardiness. She growled under her breath and stabbed at the button again.

After a moment, as she waited, barely holding on to her temper, she glanced back over her shoulder with a toss of her hair to where her partner was still on his knees, head bowed. One hand rested on the floor, supporting him, and his other arm was pressed tightly to his ribs. Lois frowned, then pulled her eyes quickly away and fixed them intently on the wooden doors before her, scowl darkening.

Another second or so passed. Her gaze, slightly less furious now and beginning to show a faint touch of blossoming anxiety, slid back across the newsroom. Her lower lip disappeared beneath her teeth as she nibbled on it fitfully. She glanced back at the elevator. And back to her unmoving partner.

Well, for goodness sakes! Why was he still down there? Why didn't he get up already? She hadn't hit him *that* hard, had she?

Had she?

/That jab was pretty hard, Lois. And that tray was heavy./

Well, yeah, but --

/Wouldn't surprise *me* if he didn't have a least one busted rib./

Oh no, I don't think...

/Maybe two./

Really? You think? Well, I didn't mean to hit him *that* hard...I was just...well, he just made me so...so...mad! You know, it's really *his* fault! It's *all* his fault! If he hadn't made me mad I wouldn't have had to hit him, would I? And, anyway --

A sharp ping and the rumble of opening doors made her start violently. She looked at the brightly-lit elevator that invited her to step inside. The moment stretched. Then, with an impatient sigh, she turned on her heel and headed back to her desk.

Still on his knees, Clark was sunk in considering his options and just about to dispense with the charade and get to his feet, having heard the elevator chime distantly. So he was a little startled to see a pair of low heeled pumps appear in front of him. He glanced up.

Luckily, Lois seemed to take his flushed face as being an indication that he was in pain, rather than embarrassment at being caught in such a ridiculous and awkward position and - even worse - almost caught abandoning it. She hesitated.

"Are you...okay?" she said, her concern just a little grudging.

"Oh..." Clark grunted as he moved to sit against his heels. "Just fine."

"Oh," he heard her say as he ducked his head, trying to avoid what he was certain was a too penetrating gaze, and buying time as he aped taking a few, steadying breaths.

Crazily, he found a fragment of an old Billy Joel song rolling around in his head.

#I'm not above going down on my knees #If there's a chance of resurrecting your love...

He had the feeling that was skewed - and Billy would probably be squawking over the desecration of his lyrics - but it seemed to fit, he thought wistfully. He wasn't really beyond doing *anything* if it meant getting Lois -

"Clark?"

He glanced up with a start. Lois had dropped to her knees beside him now, her hand on his shoulder. Her face was suddenly a mask of concern - and guilt, bolstered by his distracted air and his failure to rise to his feet, which she took as signs of distress.

"I didn't mean to...I was just so mad...oh, Lord, I hurt you, didn't I? Clark? Are you in pain? Where does it hurt? Is it your ribs? I broke your ribs, didn't I? Oh, god - don't move! No, don't I said! Wait right here, you...you're gonna be just fine, Clark! I'll go call an ambulance and we'll get you to the ER and they'll tape you up just fine and...and you can breathe okay, right? I mean, you know, sometimes you can nick a lung...not that I think you have...you shouldn't worry about that...I mean you'd be coughing up blood by now, wouldn't you? You're not are you? No, course you're not, at least you don't look like you -- "

"No," Clark reached out to grab at her sleeve as she scrambled to her feet. "It's...not so bad." He colored. He hated pretending to be hurt when he wasn't. He always had done. It seemed such a petty trick to play on someone who was concerned about you. Sometimes though, to preserve his secret, it was unavoidable. He sighed. "Just help me over there, so I can sit down."

"Oh...okay," she said doubtfully. Then, immediately taking charge again, "Here, lean on me," She helped him as he stood, pulling his arm around her shoulders. Concentrating on her new role as Florence,

she failed to notice Clark's face change as he snuggled up against her in response to her urging.

On the other hand - maybe she deserved a little angst, Clark thought. After all, she had been completely out of order. If he had been any normal guy she might well have hurt him with that stunt she'd pulled.

Playing it to the hilt now, he submitted to her ministrations with a pained groan as she helped him over to one of the nearby sofas. He thought about adding a limp, but figured that was probably carrying things just a touch too far. He did take the opportunity though to lean just a little more heavily on her shoulder for support than he needed to. That rose scent of hers was driving him crazy. He remembered it enveloping him in a warm haze as he'd nuzzled at the damp warmth of her skin...

"Here." Lois pushed him gently to sit and then sat beside him, looking at him anxiously. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Clark looked at her and he didn't have the heart to continue with the payback she undoubtedly deserved. She looked so worried. He smiled at her. "I'm fine. You knocked the wind out of me a little, that's all."

She searched his face and then, seemingly to find some truth in that, looked away from his softening gaze. "I didn't mean to hurt you," she said again.

"Well...maybe I deserved it," he said, his mood tipping over into an anxiety to reassure her as he lost his annoyance entirely. A not completely well thought out choice as it happened, because Lois straightened up sharply, her eyes turning hard, all traces of guilt and worry vanishing abruptly.

"You're damn right, you deserved it!" she snapped back as his attempt to soothe her simply focused her mind back on what had gotten her mad enough to spit in the first place and ignited the fire all over again, burning out her momentary lapse into soft concern for him. Especially since he *did* seem to be unscathed and not faking it any.

"What?" Not entirely having expected her to agree with him - and certainly not that fast and ferocious - Clark immediately did an abrupt about turn on that one. "Hey, wait a minute, *I* wasn't the one - !"

" - who decided to try getting all up close and personal when we're *supposed* to be *working*, Kent?" She tossed him an irked glare as she jerked to her feet to loom over him, hands on hips. "Just like you swore you wouldn't? Well, I don't know about *you*, but *I'd* rather get *my* thrills in newsprint! So, how about you keep your mind on something else besides your hormones, we stick to working on the story, and maybe both of us will get out of here in one piece!"

"Fine!" Clark stood up abruptly, a move which brought him almost nose to nose with this monumental thorn in his side, this woman he adored - and who he wasn't even sure he could stand to be that close to any more. "Not that I was *offering* to thrill you any other way in the

first place!" he retorted. "And I can keep my mind off of *you* just fine, Lois. You know, you ought to -- "

A strident burr interrupted him. They both looked in the direction of the fax machine as it continued to ring. Clark sighed, putting a brief hand to his forehead and rubbing a fitful path at his temple in exasperation before deciding that perhaps the interruption was fortuitous. Maybe they were best just sticking to the story after all, like she said. Anything beyond it seemed sunk in the depths of an emotional minefield. And he seemed to be the one without a map of the safe route through.

"I'll get that!"

They spoke - or, to be more accurate, they snapped - in unison, each individual tone almost identically irritated. Lois scowled. Clark shook his head, resigned, and waved her on past him, mock gallant.

"Be my guest."

"Go ahead!"

Their words collided. Both of them paused for the split second it took to see who would give way first, then Clark held up a peaceable hand. "Okay, fine. *I'll* get it."

She glared at him as he headed for the recessed corridor at the back of the room where the fax machine resided. Anger still sparked in among the darkness of her eyes, like the sizzling aftermath of a downed power line in the middle of a winter storm.

"Sure. Fine," Clark repeated to himself in a disgruntled mutter as he stalked away. "Let's stick to the *story*, Lois. I mean, we wouldn't want to slip up, make the mistake of talking like a couple of civilized human adults, now would we?"

Reaching the fax machine, he swiped at the paper spooling into the receiving tray and tore it free, examining it critically and then folding it up neatly into easily readable sections. Behind him, he heard the sudden burr of a telephone and then, a moment later, his partner's low voice as she answered. He didn't bother listening in. He scowled darkly at the innocent fax machine as it hummed merrily and scrolled out more pages in entirely too happy and contented a fashion to Clark's mind. His thoughts rolled morosely over the events of the past few hours with irritation, filing away each excess of temper, every insult, as justification for his own anger.

"And let's just forget about anything else along with it. Like sorting things out." He slapped the first section of sheets to the table in sharp punctuation to the words. "Or getting over our differences." The second pile landed on top of the first, slightly harder than they needed to. "Or, maybe, even facing up to our fears." His voice rose slightly, piqued, and then he sensed soft motion at his back.

"Running off at the mouth again, Kent? You know, you can land yourself in a heap of trouble that way."

Clark turned around sharply at that saccharine sweet interruption.

She was right behind him. He glowered at her and then returned his attention deliberately to the machine, freezing her out. "Not half as much as I can talking to you," he grumbled under his breath.

"Or your locker room buddies," Lois responded, her tone acidic. "You know the smart option would be to learn from your mistakes."

Clark grimaced and gave her a sidelong glance with all the air of a man to whom this was not a new or previously unheard jibe and who had long since grown tired of trying to defend himself against it.

"What are you doing back here anyway? Checking up on me? Can't *trust* me enough to collect a fax without worrying if I'm stealing paper supplies now?"

Lois regarded him, tight-lipped. "I came to tell you that Colin called to say he has another batch. It should come in on the tail of that, so you might as well hang around for it to arrive," she informed him frostily.

"Oh." He looked taken aback and not a little ashamed of his abrupt and unfriendly response to her arrival.

Lois hadn't waited around any to gauge his reaction. Pausing only to swipe him with a single, passing, blackly scouring glance, she was already stalking back along the corridor, her body clenched rigid with anger, by the time the automatic apology for his rudeness began to form itself on his lips.

"Lois, I'm - "

She whipped around to face him again, with all the air of someone who'd been mulling over an insult for a time and had finally given in to the irresistible impulse to respond to it, even if it was against their better judgement.

"You know that's what you said last time," she said, interrupting him. He had the impression she hadn't even heard him. "'Let's just talk'." She paused, then added bitterly, "And look where that got us."

She pivoted sharply on one heel, her steps suddenly brisk and purposeful, as she continued her march for the corner. As though regretting giving him even that much of herself, even for a moment.

Clark followed her retreat in silence. Unnoticed by her, the hard edge in his expression faded, his anger softened by compassion. "I thought where that got us was pretty good," he ventured softly after a moment to the taut, angular lines of her back.

Lois stopped dead in her tracks. Clark saw her shoulders tighten another notch or two. For a moment there was silence, in which the steady hum of the fax machine as it spewed out paper into its tray was the only sound. Beneath that silence, Clark's superhuman senses picked out the ragged breathing that hitched in Lois' chest and the hard thunder of her heart.

Then she turned around. Her eyes flayed him, huge and dark from out

of a pale face, and brimming with something dark and indefinable. "Yeah, well... sometimes what you think is good is just...lies and trouble. And..." she drew in a rough breath, "...sometimes what you think you want isn't what you need. What's good isn't always good for *you*." She stopped, then shook her head, a quick, impatient gesture, the momentary hesitation fading as she found that brisk purpose again. "And maybe we should have remembered that," she finished, voice a hoarse whisper now. "Maybe *I* should have, anyway."

She spun away again before he could find an answer to that, and then she was gone around the corner, as though she'd never been there at all, only the faint rose traces of her scent remaining.

Clark stared at the spot where she'd vanished, his heart sinking like a stone in his chest as he considered her words. They seemed pretty unequivocal, he thought unhappily, and they crushed, stillborn, what faint hope he'd harbored of reconciliation. He guessed it was pretty clear what she thought about that.

The fax machine rang shrilly a second time, jerking him from his reverie. He started and then with a shake of his head he focused on the task at hand and set himself to gathering up the incoming information. It took five minutes at best, by the time he waited for what turned out to be a substantial wad of statistics to spit itself out of the machine. Finally, he gathered the sheets together and headed back to the newsroom as he inspected them, fully determined to put personal issues aside and concentrate solely on the story. It was safer that way. His brain hurt trying to find cracks in the armor and ways through the walls that would enable him to reach Lois and make sense out of her moods.

"Colin sent us down some new figures," he told her, scanning the faxed sheets perfunctorily as he came around the corner. "I think some of these supercede those figures for '88 he sent earlier. At least - "

He stopped as he lifted his head from the sheets and found himself talking to an empty newsroom. He glanced around him, puzzled.

"Lois?"

His expression tightened.

"Lois?" he said again, raising his voice slightly.

He received his answer as a sudden wave of rose and sandalwood assaulted his nostrils and a slim hand reached around him to snatch the fax sheets as Lois emerged from the conference room behind him and accomplished the theft en route to her desk without pausing even to acknowledge him.

"There you are. I thought you'd gone," he said, and couldn't help the small relief that colored his tone. Her mood was so mercurial that he wouldn't have been surprised if she'd bailed out on him.

Lois gave him a sharp, angry glance across her shoulder. "I don't bail out on a story, Kent. Or leave my partner in the lurch in the middle of one," she told him, almost as though she'd heard his thought, and Clark flushed despite himself with the allusion. Only

recently she'd begun to question his frequent absences, his ducking out on her at awkward moments; his excuses were tending to meet with greater and more caustic inspection and be less accepted by her as unworthy of comment. In short, she was growing suspicious. Something he knew he was going to have to give serious thought to addressing and finding a solution to, before disaster struck.

But not now.

"What took you so long?" Lois added tartly.

Clark shook his head. "Nothing. Those figures Colin sent - "

"I heard," she said shortly, looking over the information and obviously blocking him out as she studied the papers with a degree of focus that was intense even for her.

Clark sighed faintly. He stood there for a moment, hands jammed deep into the pockets of his jeans, and simply studied her as she trawled through the papers and files, oblivious to him. Then, holding on to a small, tired breath, he ran a distracted hand through his hair and made his way across the newsroom to join her.

"Have we got comparisons on any of the - "

Halfway across the room his steps faltered, his words cut off as he came to a halt. His eyes grew distant as his head swung sharply to fix a suddenly intent gaze on the bank of windows on the other side of the room.

Distant, though clear and sharp as a crystal bell, he heard what sounded like a satellite news report. Something about a typhoon heading for the Philippines. The Filipino government was asking for help from Superman before catastrophe struck the mainland and its population.

Clark didn't listen to more; he'd heard enough already. There was a new air of tension about him as he cut back to his surroundings. He glanced quickly at his preoccupied partner.

There was no question that he had to go. But for a second or so he was stuck. They were in the middle of a story, his personal life was shot to hell, and Lois was already mad at him. If he lit out on her now...dropped the ball and left her with the work...she was going to blow sky-high. He needed a reason to leave she couldn't fault him for. But what? It was almost two in the morning, he could hardly tell her he'd gotten a sudden urge for a danish or frozen yogurt. He couldn't say he had a library book to return or a videotape to pick up. His last resort of many an awkward vanishing act - offering to do research and burying himself down in the archives in the bowels of the building for an indeterminate time, as far as his colleagues knew anyway - just wasn't going to work this time.

But, whatever he was going to tell her, he thought desperately, he had better think of it fast. There were lives at stake. And, though there was a window of a safety margin before that storm hit, he didn't have much time.

He glanced around him, searching for enlightenment, and his gaze landed on one of the desks on the far side of the room. The tense set

of his shoulders loosened as inspiration struck. With another quick and wary glance at Lois, he zapped across to the empty desk in a blur of speed too fast for the human eye to follow, even if Lois had happened to look in his direction. He picked up the telephone receiver, his fingers racing over the keypad as he tapped out a rapid number and then hung up. By the time the phone on his own desk started to ring he was back to where he'd been, standing outside the conference room.

Lois looked up from the paperwork on her desk with a frown to glance at the phone and then turned her head towards him. Clark grimaced his displeasure at the seeming interruption and gave her an apologetic shrug as he strode to his desk to pick up the extension. He cleared his throat. "Clark Kent?" he said and then, with a pause to listen to the static hiss of dead air, "Oh, yeah, hey...um...Mr. Mazetti! What? You're kidding!"

He kept his eyes on Lois as he spoke and then, as she questioned him silently with impatient eyes, turned slightly away, scratching the tip of a finger at his left ear as he continued the one-sided conversation, "Well, I'm real busy right now, couldn't you..." He faked a put upon sigh. "That bad, huh? Well, yeah. Okay, sure...fine, I'll be right there. Bye."

Clark replaced the receiver and then reached for his coat. "Um, look, I gotta go - "

"Go?" Lois looked up sharply from where she'd gone back to perusing the files and papers scattered across her desk.

"Uh, yeah. I'm sorry, I haven't got time to explain, Lois, it's personal," Clark said hastily, backing off rapidly for the ramp behind him as he blurted out the explanation.

"Personal? Well, can't it wait?" She stared after him, frustrated. Personal! Didn't the man have any sense of timing or proper dedication to the things that were important? One of these days - and soon - they were going to have to have a serious one on one about getting your priorities right.

"No. Um, yeah. Not really."

"For goodness sake, Clark, you can visit your dental hygienist later! Or your tailor or your - Mazetti..." she changed tack sharply as the name registered, "...isn't that your landlord?"

"Um, yeah. Uh - "

"Is there something wrong with your apartment?"

"Uh, well - "

"Well, can't *he* deal with it? I mean what're you paying rent for? What's the problem, he can't *deal* with it? What, you've got rats, cockroach infestation, a burst water main, the street's on fire..." She paused as, as though on cue, dim and distant from the street below, came the shriek of a siren. Lois glanced at the windows and then came back to him, eyes slightly wide and startled, like someone who'd just recklessly spoken a gypsy curse and found it come to fruition. "It *isn't*, is it...?"

"No... Well, not that I - "

"Okay, no fire. So what? Squatters in your attic space, aliens camping out on the sofa - "

"Lois..." Clark cut firmly through her frustrated babble, resisting being provoked into an explanation. "It's important. And it's personal. And...I have to go. Uh, I'll explain it all later, okay?"

Once he had time to figure out what he was talking about, he told himself with an inward grimace. He shrugged into his coat.

"But, right now, I just don't have the time. I'm sorry, Lois. Really. Look, I don't know how long this will take," he warned her. "Why don't you go ahead, write up the story. I'll see you in the morning. Later, maybe," he finished, distracted now as his hearing picked up more of the distant TV broadcast.

Lois scowled. "You want **me** to write up the story. **Our** story." She waved the fax sheets at him in emphasis as she watched him head up the ramp away from her. "While you disappear who knows where, for who knows how long and...Clark!" she raised her voice as he didn't take time out of his urgent lope for the stairwell to acknowledge that barb hurled in his direction. "You're supposed to be my partner! This is **our** work!"

Clark didn't turn back. In truth, although Lois didn't realize it, he was too focused on listening elsewhere to even hear her or take note of her growing irritation. She was already behind him, his mind occupied with the logistics of stopping an ecological and human disaster in as fast and safe a time as possible with as few casualties as he could manage.

"Well, okay then! Fine!" Lois hollered after him. "But I do the work, don't expect your byline on the front page, buster! You hear me?"

That got through his preoccupation. Clark turned back, his eyes a little surprised. "That's not what I meant," he said. He put his hands on the guardrail, leaning down to view her better. "I don't expect the credit for it."

"Yeah, right. That'll be a first."

"Look, not all of us - " Clark bit off the retort, blew out a soft breath, and replaced it with a grimly milder tone. "Lois, I don't care about the story. Take it."

Lois' expression underwent a curious sea change as she stared up at him, losing that spark of annoyance all at once, her features suddenly stiff and blank. "You...don't **care**...? You don't **care** about the story? But...Clark this is your story too," she blurted. "You broke it," she conceded magnanimously. "I mean, it was obvious of course, I'd have seen it too and it was really just luck you got there...well, anyway, it's more yours than mine. Don't you **want** your byline on it?" She sounded nothing more than utterly perplexed now and then, lapsing back into pique, "What kind of a reporter are you anyway? How can you not care about the story? It's what we do!"

Clark shook his head sharply, straightening purposefully from the rail. "It doesn't matter. It's all yours," he said carelessly. He took another frustrated glance at the stairwell. "I mean it. Really."

There was an instant's silence. For a moment, Lois seemed unable to grasp what he was telling her. She looked away from him and down at the papers in her hands, growing so still all at once that Clark frowned, hesitating by the rail and even his urgent mission suddenly forgotten as he sensed something serious in her demeanor that struck him as odd all at once. Not just serious. She looked...hurt. His frown deepened.

"Lois?" he asked.

She slid into her seat without answering, lips thinning into a stubborn line. "I'm **not** taking your story," she told him, as though it was a bribe he'd offered or the bait in some kind of trap.

Clark held back an imprecation. "You're not **taking** it, I'm giving it to you. Lois, please - trust me," he added sincerely as she glared up on him. "I don't want it. Okay?"

"Well...well I don't want it either!" Flushed now, Lois punched at the button of her computer, turning it off. She almost sounded triumphant, as though she'd succeeded in putting one over on him on the subject. "**I** don't steal stories," she added a grumble.

Clark's expression turned puzzled and a little irked. There had been just the faintest hint of accusation in that denial. What was she getting at? "Neither do I," he said. He sighed again. "Lois, just write the story, huh? If you like we can go over the copy later, but really, there's no -- "

"Okay! All right!" She grabbed at the nearest file to hand and slammed it open. "Fine! Great! Terrific! **I'll** write it! But I'm putting **your** byline on it!"

Clark clicked his tongue impatiently. "I don't **want** my byline on it!" he reiterated, getting annoyed now. She was making it sound as though he was pulling some kind of con trick on her.

Lois sniffed. She shuffled some papers violently. "Tough!"

Clark threw up frustrated hands. He didn't have time for this! Couldn't she just take the darn story and be done with it? What was wrong with her? She mistrusted him so much now she couldn't just take a simple offering at face value?

"Great!" he snapped, glancing at the escape route of the stairs and then, shaking his head sharply as he resumed his course for them, "Do what you want with it! Write it up, make origami birds out of it, throw it in the trash if you like! I just don't care, Lois!"

He was three steps clear of getting out of there when she spoke up behind him. Clark turned around, startled. "What?" he said, certain he'd misheard.

She didn't look at him, didn't lift her head from that intense study of the files she was holding, clenched in sudden fists. The silence lay weighted between them. "You don't want to work with me any more, do you?" she repeated, flatly, at last.

The accusation, devoid of any emotion or color, blindsided him so completely he could only stare at her for a long tick of moments. Where the devil had *that* come from? "No!" he blurted hurriedly at last. "No, that's not true, Lois, I - "

"Yes it is! You want out of this partnership, don't you?! I knew it! I knew you'd run out on me! I just - "

"Lois, I'm not running anywhere," Clark protested, but she cut him off.

"You know the really dumb thing?" she tossed at him virulently. "The thing I can't figure out? Why I'm surprised!" she answered herself before he could. Not that he'd been about to. *He'd* figured it for a rhetorical question.

Clark held back a sigh. "I *want* to work with you. I happen to think we make a pretty good team. On the front page anyway," he added a dry, sardonic murmur and then, as she glared up at him, impatiently, "I've *always* wanted to work with you, Lois. I still do! You're a good reporter, a great reporter, I've learned a lot from you, and - "

"Yeah? And where did you learn the most, Clark? Here or in a backlot garage?" Lois retorted sarcastically. He flinched at the glitter of fury in her eyes as they impaled him where he stood.

The arrow hit its mark far harder than she'd intended it should. She hadn't intended wounding at all, she had hardly thought about what she was saying, wrapped up in her anger as she was. But she regretted the words instantly as she saw him stiffen and his face turn blank. His eyes darkened on her, anger stirring in them.

Lois' lips tightened mulishly. Well, she wasn't going to apologize for that. He'd...deserved it. Her tone racketed up a notch from aggrieved to hostile as she switched tracks away from something too intensely painful to both of them to risk using as a weapon or an exercise in point-scoring. As a barb it had been a double edged sword, slicing at her heart as much as his.

"Oh, just go!" she snarled. "If that's what you want, just...go! Why not? Everyone else did!" She gesticulated with violent hands to punctuate her continuing diatribe against him.

After some moments more of muttering and tossing things around on her desk like a temperamental chef preparing salad, she glanced up sharply at him and her expression clouded impatiently, seemingly not only surprised to discover him still there, but irked by his continuing presence to boot, as though he was an unwelcome eavesdropper on her anger.

"Well? What are you waiting for?" she growled.

Clark ignored her. He was still trying to figure where this notion of

hers came from and he thought he might have an answer. Sometimes, he'd noted, with Lois reverse psychology was as marked as reverse thought processing. In short, apply the opposite logic and you generally had your answer. The opposite... She was yelling about him leaving, breaking up their partnership, so maybe that meant...

Gotcha. Of course. Simple.

"*You* want out though," he accused softly. "Don't you? That's what this is about. You. Not me."

"What?" Lois' eyes widened a touch. Where had he gotten that one from? She opened her mouth to tell him it was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard - and he took the wind out of her sails for the second time in so many seconds.

"Look, Lois, you don't have to pretend any more," he said. Lois noted with dismay that he had his earnest face on. "It's clear you regret what happened between us. That you want to forget it ever happened. I...I want you to know I respect that, Lois. Really, I do. But...I can't go back to being just partners. I just can't. So..."

He stopped again, then his shoulders set resolutely as he went on quietly, "So...if you want me to leave...I will. I'll hand in my notice to Perry tomorrow and I'll get out of your life. You'll never have to see me again. I wasn't intending to leave, but if that's what you want, if that's what it takes to make you happy...I just want you to be happy, Lois. But being here...after...what we did...I'm just breaking your heart."

Listening, Lois' expression darkened, like the onset of a winter storm.

"Breaking my - ?" she choked. "Why you - don't you dare put this on me! If I want you to leave, you'll know it, Clark Kent! I'll make sure you do! I'll tell you to! I'll mail your resignation letter to Perry myself! But until I do, don't you dare make my decisions for me! Don't you dare have the nerve to decide what's best for me! Of all the *arrogant*, self-important - "

"You *don't* want me to leave?" Clark interrupted bemusedly, excising what was, for him at least, the important point in there.

"*Why* would I want you to leave?!" she demanded angrily, turning on him with that explosive yell.

"Lois, apart from ordering me around you haven't spoken to me in over a week! You haven't exactly been making me feel welcome! All that yelling you did at me tonight...all that..." he gestured violently with his hands in frustration, "throwing things at me...that was as much as you've said to me in days! A rattlesnake would have gotten closer to you lately!"

"So? You're my *partner*!" she wailed, as though that settled it. "You *can't* leave me! You just - " She stopped and then whispered, stricken, "You can't."

There was something in that, something beyond anger, that tugged at him for an instant and then it was gone, snuffed out, as Lois

scowled, folding her arms tight and defensive under her breasts. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," she said tartly and then, tone turning decisive and curt, "I'm not even going to discuss it any more."

She dropped her arms and headed for her desk at a sharp clip, face suffused with annoyance. Clark watched her go. Was there anything he could say or do this evening that wouldn't earn him a mauling from his partner or enrage her more than he already had? He was beginning to doubt it.

"Okay," he conceded, defeated. He paused to gather his thoughts. "So...you don't want to leave. I don't want to leave. And you don't want me to leave." He stopped to be sure he'd covered all bases there and then added hastily, "And I don't want you to leave either." Yup, that seemed to take care of it. Except that he wasn't sure she entirely believed him. She still had that closed, suspicious look on her face. "So can we drop the subject now?" he suggested hopefully.

Lois sniffed. "Fine by me."

"Great." Clark muttered wryly and then straightened, becoming still. He raised his head, striking an attitude like a hound scenting blood on the air, as something much more urgent and immediate than arguing with Lois prickled at the periphery of his hearing.

The sound of a child, crying fretfully, a young woman's voice offering up listless reassurance, both of them a vague backdrop to a sharper, more rapid litany. A local journalist was apparently reporting now from the site of a municipal city storm shelter, crowded with frightened people. There were concerns that Superman had failed as yet to respond to the government's plea for assistance, speculation that he might not turn up at all. Clark sighed. He *had* to get out of here.

"Fine. Go. No one's stopping you."

Lois had been engrossed in searching through her papers. Now she'd lifted her head to look at him coldly and it was only then that Clark realized he'd inadvertently spoken the desperate thought aloud. He noted the renewed spark of irritation in her face with consternation, obviously she was taking his desire to leave as a personal affront.

"Lois, you don't understand - " Clark started unhappily.

She didn't look at him as she went back to gathering the papers. But her posture visibly tightened.

"I thought you were leaving."

Clark bit down on his own displeasure. Just once it would be nice if she would give him the benefit of the doubt, realize that there were other things besides her to concern him in the universe. He puffed out a tight breath.

"Okay," he conceded reluctantly. He didn't have time to cajole her out of her anger. Not now at least. His thoughts returned guiltily to other, more pressing matters than the shards of his personal life.

"Look, Brenda's assignation is logged in my computer, if you need it," he offered in a firmly calm and controlled tone. "You know where to find it." He hesitated. "I'll...see you later," he said. It had the faint undercurrent of a question attached to it.

Lois didn't respond.

Clark scowled at the dark head bent stubbornly over the papers, his good intentions vanishing as irritation stung at him, renewed. "Fine," he muttered under his breath as he left.

Behind him, Lois raised her head to watch him stalk away from her, her eyes withdrawn. Her hands tightened on the file she was holding, as though it had become a lifeline in the middle of a storm tossed ocean. In the confused thoughts rolling through her mind, an idea was forming...one that she could hardly fathom.

/Trust me.../

/I don't steal stories.../

/You're not taking it...I'm giving it to you.../

Eyes darkening, she stared at the point where Clark had vanished. Then she shook her head, abruptly dismissing the run of thought before it could lead her to conclusions and concessions that she didn't want to succumb to, ruthlessly culling the small moment of weakness that had momentarily snuck up on her like a baby seal.

She grimaced.

"Just stick to the story, Lois," she advised herself caustically. "It's safer that way."

The story.

Her gaze wandered back to the empty stairwell and lingered there.

Right.

She gathered up the Millcorn papers, organized them with swift efficiency, switched her computer back on and, after a moment, hauled in a deep and steady breath and began to type.

It took Superman a little over two hours to nudge the typhoon off course and out into the middle of the Philippine Sea with some judicious use of super breath and then trail it, ensuring that his interference didn't simply send it careering directly into the path of anything or anyone else it could harm. Messing around with weather systems - even to save lives - always made him uneasy. Nature held a delicate balance, and it was all too easy to upset it, disturb the pattern in one area and you risked throwing it out somewhere further along, simply swapping one disaster zone for another.

Finally though, it shredded itself out and he was free to return to

help pick up the pieces it had left in its wake. Damage had been minimal, thanks to his timely arrival. It had taken out the straggling wooden building on the edge of a coastal village, right on the tip of its tailwind. A couple of others, further along the headland, were now scattered around the rocky headland like matchsticks. One of them had been the local school. But the village had had plenty of warning and its people were inured to such extremes of nature. They'd had the sense to close everything down tight and stay out of the way until the ravager passed over them. No one had been hurt and Clark knew that with the ingenuity that made them able to carve out an existence on this remote and dangerous place, the village would have rebuilt the few casualties of property within a few days. Understanding the pride and resilience that bred itself in them - recognizing it as something very like what he had known since a child in his own special little piece of the world - Superman didn't insult them with an offer to help the repair effort, but simply left them to it.

After a quick tour to ensure no one else had been caught in the typhoon's path and finally satisfied, he turned back for Metropolis - where an emotional storm much more violent and less easy, he suspected, to tame, was undoubtedly waiting for him.

Ten minutes later he stood on the walkway of an empty and abandoned newsroom, hands on his hips and looking anxiously around him.

There was no sign of Lois. She wasn't in the ladies room, or at the fax machine or anywhere in the vicinity at all. He just couldn't sense her. He might have assumed that she had finished writing up the Henley story and left, but he knew it was unlikely. He noted that her coat and purse were gone, but over by his desk the faint glow of his computer drew him, among the dimmed shadows of the room. If she'd left, gone home, then she would have closed everything down, wouldn't she? She was usually careful about that kind of thing. Methodical, like with everything else in her professional life, almost to the point of obsession, though she wouldn't thank him for applying the term. Tenacious, maybe. She'd admit to that.

Clark cracked a grin through the tired mask of his face with the thought, unable to resist. Lois was always kinda...cute...when she was in the middle of one of her self-deluding moments.

As he moved down the ramp and got closer, he was struck by several worrying indications that Lois' departure had been abrupt and hasty. A mug of coffee sat on his desk, already showing the scum of cooling milk around its rim. Though Lois had varying ideas from him on what constituted clutter and he had often found her protests that the mess of files and papers on her desk was in fact a perfectly logical filing system to be ludicrous, he knew that discarded coffee mugs weren't a part of her usual disaster zone. In fact, such things irritated her immensely if they were left lying around. She had been known to mutter vicious death threats against anyone who used her mug and then left it with that hard to shift ring of congealed milk for her to rinse later. She wasn't likely to have left this one, unless...

Clark didn't want to think about unless. Unless had too many bad vibes attached to it.

On the floor he spotted a button he recognized as being from her coat. Torn free as she'd yanked it from the back of her chair and unnoticed in her rush to leave?

He crouched briefly to scoop it up.

"Lois, what are you - ?"

The words stuck in his throat and became a low groan as, halfway to his feet again, his eye was caught by what was displayed on the flickering computer screen above him. His fingers clenched spasmodically around the button, crushing it to powder in his fist. He failed to notice as his gaze remained locked, stricken, on what he knew instantly Lois would have read as confirmation of all his lies.

"Dear Mr. White,

I would be appreciative if you would take this letter as a formal declaration of my intent to resign my position as reporter..."

The rest of that damning evidence of his intentions went unread as he straightened abruptly, cursing his own stupidity. That dumb, stupid letter! Why had he left it there where she could - ?

Lois.

Oh, Lois...

"No..." he murmured.

This was just great. As though things weren't bad enough between them, she had to -- Lord, what was she thinking? What *could* she be thinking?

Berating himself viciously for a complete idiot now, he headed hastily for the elevator.

He landed surreptitiously on the fire escape outside Lois' apartment window a mere five seconds later. He paused for a moment, unsure how to continue. She was going to be mad. And upset. Superman probably had a better chance of getting her to listen, but he really needed to explain himself as Clark.

Before he had a chance to make the decision he realized that the apartment in front of him was empty. There were lights on in the living room, but Lois wasn't in there. He scanned the rooms tentatively, double checking, but there was no doubt about it. His scan of the living room picked up her coat thrown carelessly across the back of one sofa, her purse next to it. Several of its contents were strewn across the cushions, spilling from its interior, giving mute testimony to how violently it had been tossed there.

Elsewhere, there were other signs of Lois' mercurial temper at work. Something lay on the floorboards beside the brick fireplace. Clark focused on it and grimaced. The picture of him with his parents that

he'd given to her after she'd spent time with them in Smallville. She'd babbled on for days about how wonderful his parents were, especially his Mom, and in the end, on impulse, he'd presented her with a copy of the photo as a gift.

She had seemed delighted with it at the time and later had placed it in a prominent spot on her living room cabinet. Now, it lay in a glitter of glass shards. Above, a fresh scar chipped out of the brickwork showed clearly where it had hit when she'd thrown it. Beside it, like forlorn confetti after a disastrous wedding, lay a text on Chinese history which he'd loaned her just the week before. It had been torn to shreds, its pages scattered.

Clark sighed heavily and set off in search of her.

He searched until he ran out of places to check out. He hadn't picked up a sign of Lois anywhere in the city. He'd checked out all of her favorite haunts, but there had been nothing. Knowing how upset she must be, he'd made a special tour of all the late night diners he could find around her apartment, but she wasn't in any of them and none of the early morning clientele had seen her when he'd described her to them.

Finally, exhausted, he returned to his own apartment, weary with the night's endeavors, the strain of it all weighing heavily on him.

Tiredly, he trudged his way up the stairs, telling himself he'd get just a few hours rest and then take another sweep. He hadn't really explored the dock area or further downtown, around the new harbor project. He didn't see why she would have headed down there, but he guessed anything was worth a try. He'd phone her. Maybe, she'd gone back home by now. She might pick up and everything would be all right again. She might not listen to him, she might hang up when she heard his voice, but at least he'd know where she was, that she was okay. The rest of it he could deal with later. He was just too drained to think any more. Or to handle another fight with her. He just wanted to be sure that she was safe.

Clark pushed open the front door and entered the darkness of his apartment. He closed the door behind him and shrugged off his coat, draping it carelessly over the railing, before he headed down the stairs, numb and weary with worry.

He dropped the paper bags he was carrying to the table beside the sofa, giving them a rueful glance as he did. He had no real idea why he had felt the urge to visit the local deli and pick up breakfast en route to the apartment. He hadn't eaten since the previous evening, but that hardly mattered, and he wasn't at all hungry. Maybe all these months of exposure to Lois had infected him with her propensity for food bingeing when she was miserable, he thought. The idea brought on a wry smile despite his somber mood, like the faint gleam of sun through clouds, before it faded.

He straightened with a low sigh and rubbed at the back of his neck with a heavy hand as he tried to think his way through the wooziness in his head to what he should do next.

"So..." a cool and clipped voice said from the shadows, startling him. "What took you so long?"

Clark froze.

She was leaning up against the rough stone of the archway, arms folded loosely around her as she hugged herself. Her slim figure was wrapped in darkness, backlit from the faint light cast through the bedroom window behind her, so that she appeared as something insubstantial and ethereal, only partly there. Lost in those shadows, her eyes were unreadable, even to him.

"Picking up some plane tickets? Checking out routes at the bus station? I don't see much evidence of packing around here, maybe you like travelling - "

Clark's eyes lit. "Lois!"

Fatigue dropped away from him as he practically bounded across the room to scoop her up against his chest, gathering her tight and close before she could move to evade him. He closed his eyes, relief flooding through him as he put a hand against her hair to press her cheek to his. "Lois..." he murmured thankfully. "Where've you been? I've been - " His face changed, turning to swift confusion as he pulled back abruptly to hold her at arm's length. He glanced across his shoulder and up the stairs. "Wait a minute, how did you -- ?" Lois, who had held herself taut and rigid in his impulsive embrace, like a cat submitting distastefully to being mauled by a particularly large and over-friendly dog, shrugged herself free of him with a sinuous twist of her shoulders and stepped clear, putting distance between them.

"It took me all of three minutes." She gave him a contemptuous look across one shoulder as she glided away towards the large windows at the other end of the bedroom. "You know *nothing* about security, Kent. A kid could break in here."

She leaned against the wall to stare pensively out of the windows and onto the patio beyond. "Under the circumstances," she said acidly as she fixed her gaze on the darkened alley, "I didn't think you'd mind."

Clark, reduced to standing awkwardly in the archway where she'd left him, recognized that brittle coolness in her with dismay. He suspected that it was more lethal, less forgiving and would be harder to break through than the white hot rage she'd thrown at him earlier back at the Planet and which had undoubtedly been the motivating factor in driving her here to confront him on his return home. Unfortunately, it seemed that the longer she'd waited, the more she'd seethed over imagined lies, broken promises and shattered trust, anger had hardened to a shell of frigid armor.

Her cool, 'couldn't care less' demeanor wasn't fooling him though. Frigid as freshly cracked ice or not - she was ticked. Seriously ticked. And anger was raging like boiling lava beneath that frosted exterior. Just waiting to explode.

"I don't mind," he conceded quietly and she offered him a tight, brittle glance across her shoulder before she returned her attention to what was fascinating her about the brick wall opposite. A look that said she hadn't been asking his permission. Clark winced.

As he considered the best way to respond to that, the implications of her presence here and what she'd just said crept their way into his mind. Heart hammering up a storm in his chest, he also realized that it was only by the saving grace of that last minute impulse to stop at the deli and the accompanying decision to walk the few blocks between to his apartment after picking up breakfast, that had stopped him from landing on the patio in full superhero regalia. He had been a split second's whim away from spinning out of the Suit with her watching. The narrowness of his escape made him lightheaded for a moment, so he missed what Lois said next.

"What?" he managed weakly, after a moment.

"I said, maybe I should be the one asking that question," Lois repeated smoothly, turning her head to view him. Her eyes glittered in the shadows.

His brow puckered. "What question?"

Lois sighed heavily. An exasperated sound that said she was dealing with a moron. "Where have you been all this time? I mean," she turned around and spread her arms wide as she looked scathingly around the darkened bedroom, "nothing wrong here."

His air of puzzlement deepened and she enlightened him, sardonically. "Your landlord? Wasn't there supposed to be something wrong with your apartment? You know - the reason why you went haring out of the Planet and left me your story to write up?"

"Oh." Clark floundered for a second, then looked sheepish. "I uh...forgot to pay the rent this month. Just slipped my mind."

Lois stared at him, cynically. "Your landlord called you at the paper at two a.m. to remind you to pay your rent?"

"Well...yeah." Clark, caught by the ill-thought out explanation found himself forced to go with it. He shrugged. "He's like that. Anyway, like I said, it slipped my mind, I paid up, end of story. Well, I've had a lot of things to think about this week," he added as she continued to regard him dubiously and was both gratified to see that the reference to their continuing estrangement had the desired effect of distracting her attention, and regretful that it caused her to look suddenly disconcerted.

The moment abruptly caught up with him. He'd been running mostly on adrenaline and whatever reserves of solar energy were still stored within him for the better part of the morning and both were running dry, leaving him almost on empty. Feeling relief weaken the joints in his knees all at once, he let himself drop to the edge of the bed behind him, before they gave out on him completely.

"Okay." Lois nodded, seemingly prepared to let that one lie. At least in favor of attack from another direction. "So, since you didn't come back here...where *have* you been then?"

"Oh. Uh...I...got talking to Leo and then...I went back to the Planet. When you weren't there..." he trailed off, then went on, "I went looking for you. I was worried. When I couldn't find you at your apartment, I - " He shrugged and then leaned forward, setting his elbows to his knees as he drew tired hands across a face that felt

weighted and old. "I've been all over town looking for you."

"Really?" Lois said, straightening abruptly from her perch against the wall.

Clark opened his eyes and fixed them on her as he lifted his head from his hands. A small spark of anger bloomed in his chest in response to the scathing note in her voice. "Yeah, Lois, really. Like I said, I was worried about you."

"So worried you didn't even have the guts to tell me you were running out on...that you were leaving the Planet. I saw that letter, Clark," she informed him unnecessarily. "I wasn't prying," she added sharply, somehow making it sound as though she was responding to an accusation from him that she had been, before she went on rapidly, "I was looking for Brenda's assignation. You always file your assignations under 'asg.'"

She made that sound like an accusation too. As though it was entirely his fault that she'd stumbled across something much more illuminating and upsetting than what she'd been searching for. In a way, Clark guessed she was right about that. He had abbreviated his resignation letter to 'rsg.' for convenience when filing it away. An easy enough mistake to make. For both of them.

"Lois, about that letter - " he started.

"So, just when were you planning on letting me in on the secret, Clark?" Lois continued as though he hadn't spoken. "What were you going to do? Leave a note on my desk? Message me by courier? Or, wait, let's see...I know - you weren't going to tell me at all. Were you?" she accused, tone wavering slightly through the vicious bite in her voice. "You were just gonna saddle up and mosey on out, ride off into the sunset without a backward glance. You're really geared up to living the American Dream, aren't you, Clark? Live loose. Live easy. A girl in every city room?"

His anger died. He straightened, hands dangling loose between his knees as he considered her. "No. That's not true," he said softly.

"Isn't it?"

"No." He got to his feet and moved to take hold of her, turning her abruptly to face him as she tried to thwart him. "Lois, I'm not going anywhere. I swear," he pledged as she savaged him with a dark, accusatory glance.

She tugged herself free of his grip. "You think I really care?" she bit out, savagely. "Well, here's a news flash, Farmboy. I don't."

Clark frowned. "If you don't, then why are you here?"

She looked at little nonplussed. Then, her expression clearing, "You lied to me. I care about that."

"So much that you broke into my apartment?" said Clark, skeptically.

She shrugged. "I think we need to talk."

Clark snorted. "We've needed to talk all week, Lois," he said, stalking away from her impatiently. "You haven't seemed keen. What's so different now?"

She followed him into the living room without answering. He looked over his shoulder at her as he headed for the kitchen. "Well, guess what, Lois, I don't care about talking right now. I'm tired and I'm...hungry and, if you don't mind, I'd like to be on my own. You know where the door is. See if you can get through it quicker on the way out than you did on the way in," he challenged her, a little churlishly.

He opened the refrigerator and hauled out a jug of iced orange juice. Setting it on the counter with a solid thump he went looking for a glass. When he turned around she was still there. She looked a little wan, drained, but he was too irked to take account of that. He quirked a brow at her as he poured juice steadily. "Something else?" He held up the jug. "Can I get you some juice while you think?"

Lois stared at him, caught off guard by the sarcastic bite in his tone. She shook her head, mutely. Clark shrugged and put the jug back in the refrigerator.

"Why?" Lois whispered. Clark looked back at her as he closed the heavy door, surprised by the question and the soft, uncertain voice that had delivered it. And for the first time he saw the glitter of tears. Pity stirred in him, leeching the anger from him, and the hard light in his eyes softened. She was tired of playing games, just as he was. He understood that. Even her anger wasn't holding back the pain any longer.

"Lois - "

"Why did you do it?" she repeated, brokenly, all of the hurt gnawing within her spilling out of her all at once. "I need to know - " she faltered. He saw her swallow hard and then she shook her head, turning blindly away. Clark moved convulsively, getting in her way before she'd taken more than a couple of steps for the front door. And suddenly the distance between them was no distance at all as he reached out by reflex, putting his hands against her shoulders and pulling her gently into his arms.

"Ssshh, it's okay," he murmured, wrapping her close as she tried half-heartedly to struggle free. She was sobbing softly now. "Lois...don't," he pleaded with her. He couldn't bear to hear her cry. He never could. He didn't understand any of it, her switching moods, her anger, her coldness, all week he'd been lost and angry and hurt, but right then none of that mattered. He understood one simple thing and that was enough. Right now, she needed him to hold her. And nothing, no matter what set itself between them, could ever prevent him from giving her that solace.

She was stiff against him as he held her, breath hitching in her chest, the tracks of her tears glimmering under the dim lighting, her eyes wounded as she lifted her head. "Please," he said again softly, reaching up to wipe the moisture from one cheek. "Don't."

She was only inches away from him. He ducked his head, his lips finding hers by instinct. It wasn't a passionate kiss, but it was deep and warm, tender, and he put everything of his emotions into it, his sorrow that he had hurt her, his love, and his desire to help.

Lois stared up at him, eyes soft, and then she shook her head sharply, that momentary tenderness fading, as she pulled herself out of his arms. She turned away, folding her arms tight. Clark watched her in silence for a moment.

"Lois - " he said reassuringly, reaching for her again.

"No, don't," she said quietly. "Don't complicate things, Clark."

He dropped his hand back at his side. "I'm not trying to - " He paused, recognizing the futility of trying to fight the continuing suspicion in her. "I just want to help," he said simply.

Anger flared in her eyes as she turned to face him. "By lying to me?"

"I never lied to you - "

"By running out on me?"

"I'm not running out on - "

"I see." She folded her arms again and glared at him. For a moment, Clark was awed by her resilience. Only moments before she'd been in his arms, fragile and wounded, like a child, and now she might never have given in to that weakness, might never have offered him that momentary surrender at all. In the blink of an eye she had reverted to fire and ice and she was stunning with it. In every way, in every line, she was hardened against him. A stone goddess, cold and implacable. But Clark could see how fiercely she was trembling and he suspected it wasn't through anger alone.

"So, you wrote that resignation letter to Perry as a gag. Is that it?" Lois snapped, sarcastically, drawing him reluctantly from admiration to wary attention. "No, wait, don't tell me," she said, tight lipped, as he opened his mouth. "You've changed your mind. Right? It's all a big mistake! Well, you got that one right!" She glared at him. "Or one of us did! And, let's see, what else? Oh - you never meant to lead me on. You thought I understood. You just want to be friends!" She spat that last at him as though it was a curse.

"And...you don't care about any of that," Clark said dryly, folding his own arms and watching her as she paced the length of the living room in front of him with this tirade.

"Don't you twist my words around, Clark Kent! I'm *telling* you what I care about!"

"Which is?"

"I - I - " she floundered and then, viciously, "Why don't I tell you what I *don't* care about?!" she countered. "Like...like lounge

lizards who worm their way into a girl's heart and then skulk out in the middle of the night when they've got all they can from her! Who can't keep their hands to themselves or their minds on - "

Clark had stopped listening. Lounge lizards. She'd used that before. Skulk out? In the middle of the night? When had he...?

A welter of vaguely swirling thoughts that had plagued him since they'd fought in the newsroom, that had prickled and teased at him all morning, dancing just out of reach on the edges of his mind and never coming into focus, returned now to badger him. He retreated into his own musing, leaving her to rant on her own.

/Lounge lizards.../

/Skulk out in the middle of the night.../

There was anger and frustration in her voice, in the words she'd thrown at him, in the distant sounds of her clipped steps upon the carpeted floor. Everything about her, her voice, her movements, spoke of rage. Pure and raging fury.

What Clark heard was pain.

Something was stirring in the back of his mind, something she'd said earlier, when she'd been mad at him for trying to kiss her. In his head a flicker of vague understanding was beginning to coalesce.

/You're all the same.../

/...a school for lounge lizards.../

And, merging with those faint echoes, what she had said just before he'd left the newsroom.

/You don't want to be my partner.../

/I knew you'd run out on me!//

/Go! Everyone else did!//

Their fears. *Her* fears.

And, quite suddenly, as though some wiser part of him had reached out and tapped him on the shoulder to draw his attention, he began to understand. The jigsaw bits and pieces that had been revolving in his head all evening suddenly came together. Suddenly, it all made sense. *She* made sense. The final pieces of the puzzle fit. And his suspicions resolved themselves abruptly into a clear and crystal revelation that for a moment stunned him.

Struck by the simplicity of it, he fixed his gaze on the stiff lines of his partner as she restlessly quartered the length of the living room. For a moment he was utterly dumbfounded, not just at his stupidity in not seeing what had been there, right in front of him, right there from the start, but that she could actually have considered such a thing. About him. She *couldn't* seriously think that he would -

"No..." he murmured.

Oblivious to him, hardly caring if he was still around to hear her, Lois continued her seething and stalking of the room.

" - really know why I expected anything different - "

Clark stirred. "Lois - " he started resolutely.

" - every other guy did, why not you too? What makes you so special?! I mean, it's not as though - "

"Lois - "

" - really should have known better than to trust - "

"LOIS!!"

She stopped with a jolt at that sharp, authoritative barking of her name and turned to look at him where he stood, slouched in that laconic pose that she already knew he was wont to use when he was trying to hold on to a situation that was careering wildly beyond his control: hands fisted into his pockets and his face closed down. An island of calm in the whirlwind of her rage.

She blinked. "Yes?" she said faintly after a second's silence.

Clark didn't immediately answer. Under the weight of his intent stare, as it tingled at her skin, Lois resisted the urge to shift nervously like a recalcitrant child about to be lectured for some misdemeanor. Then he said softly, "I'm not Claude Rochert, Lois."

Beneath the deceptively mild tone there was a faint edge, a curious mixture of pity and pique - anger that she would even consider comparing him to someone who had hurt her so badly.

For a moment he thought she hadn't heard him. Her face was suddenly still and stagnant as lake water, devoid of expression. In her eyes there was nothing but darkness, as though his words had swept everything of emotion from her, leaving her empty. Then, just as he was about to call her on it again, she swallowed convulsively. Her eyes filled, with shock and confusion, and something else, intangible and harder to define. Fear? Panic? Or a desperate hope that she'd misheard him, misunderstood.

"C-Claude Rochert..." for a moment it seemed that Lois might choke on the name as she forced it out of her throat, then her tone hardened. "What are you talking about? Claude Rochert has...has nothing to do with this."

Clark's eyes narrowed. Oh no. She wasn't getting away with dissembling this time. Not on this. It was too important. "Hasn't he?"

He moved for her, purposefully. Lois flinched at his approach, quivering as she stood her ground. She seemed fixed in place, unable to break away from his steady gaze, like a rabbit held in thrall beneath the hypnotizing stare of a rattlesnake. Her eyes, bright but

fierce on his, denied her fear even to herself, using her anger as a warding charm against it.

Clark closed the distance between them and reached out, putting up a hand to cradle her jaw, pulling her eyes back to his as she blinked and looked stubbornly away. "I think he has everything to do with this."

The piercing directness of his gaze grew gentle and his hand shifted, laying itself lightly against her cheek. "He hurt you so badly," he said. "Why do you keep pretending that he didn't? You act like you made a mistake. Like choosing the wrong wine for dinner or catching the wrong bus downtown. As though it was nothing more than that. But you're not fooling me, Lois. He hurt you. He hurt you so much you can't ever imagine trusting anyone again. And it's time - past time - you admitted to that. Let it go."

Renewing anger blazed, incandescent, in her eyes. It seemed to give her the strength to resist him. She pulled away sharply, but he shot out a hand, gripping her arm to hold her there, not willing to let go now that he had her on the ropes. Somewhere, instinctively, he knew suddenly that this was the key to understanding what had gone wrong between them and he wasn't about to let it lie.

"You...you're insane," she hissed. She made no attempt to struggle free, perhaps recognizing that it would be futile, warned by the fierce glint in his eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Lois - "

"No, I - I don't want - "

"Lois, listen to me." He tightened his grip on her arms, a move that was curiously more soothing than oppressive. "We have to talk about - "

"No! No, we don't! We don't *have* to do anything! I'm not going to discuss this! I won't - we were talking about the Planet," she changed tack desperately. "We were talking about you running out on everyone, on Perry, on -- "

/...me.../

The word was lost, buried beneath a gasp as Clark jerked her up against him, his eyes burning with a heat that frightened and dizzied her all at once.

"To hell with the Planet!" he rasped as she stared up at him, protest shaken out of her. "Don't you get it, Lois? I don't care about the Planet! I don't care about any of it! I love you! Can't you understand that? Don't you know that? I *love* you!" he breathed again, roughly.

She could feel that explosion of breath, hot and peppermint scented, against her skin, they were so close now.

"That's all that matters to me. Not the story, not the Planet, not...not anything else. Just you."

Lois felt as though the world was tilting away from her, everything that she'd held as an absolute truth was suddenly making no sense at all. She tried to hold on to her anger, her fury that he should even consider suggesting...that he could try tricking her this...this...

His lips pressed themselves fiercely to hers for a brief, giddy moment, and then released her so abruptly that she staggered a little. And then she was gathered up in his arms, his hand tender against her hair, his breath warm against her ear.

"Lois..." he murmured as he crushed her to him. "God, don't you know that? Don't you know - " He pulled back, swallowing over the sudden compression in his throat, his eyes becoming molten and dark with hidden messages she only barely caught or understood. "Don't you know how much I love you?" he said.

She made a soft sound, almost a whimper, and Clark shook his head, studying her for a moment, uncertain how far he could push her on this. In her eyes, suddenly huge and dark in the middle of a chalk complexion, he could see clearly the struggle that was warring within her, there among the hard glitter of tears; could see how much, how desperately, she wanted to believe him. Believe *in* him. Trust him. And yet how hard it was for her to break through the old barriers, the old wounds, all the calluses that had formed themselves on her heart. She wanted to...but she couldn't. She was too afraid of being hurt again, too afraid of being made the fool, to take that first, faltering step.

Compassion melted the hard edge of frustration in his gaze. He shifted, his hand drawing back her hair from her cheek. "I'm not him, Lois," he reiterated gently.

Lois shook her head. "Clark..." she whispered and he could see how desperately she was holding on, how easy it would be to break her down. He didn't want that. He didn't want to hurt her any more. He wanted her to come to him on her own, to face up to her past, admit to her fears, but not forced into it this way.

He bent forward to press his lips gently to her cheek, a gesture that held more of simple friendship and respect in it than it did anything of love or passion or the fierce possession that had been in his kiss of a moment earlier. Then he withdrew, his eyes holding hers solemnly.

"It's okay," he assured her, tiredly. "I just needed to tell you. We're not the same, Lois, him and me."

Lois stared up at him, mutely, struck by the tenderness in the unspoken promise he'd just given. That he loved her. No matter what she did or said, he would always love her and that love required no commitment from her, no concessions, no forgiveness or surrender to make it real or enduring. He was asking nothing from her that she couldn't give him of her own free will. He had no expectations, made no judgements, had no demands. His love was unselfish and giving. He simply cared.

Still, she couldn't let it lie, entirely. Suspicion and mistrust were too deeply embedded within her to be lightly thrown aside now. No matter how much the truth of his emotions, the honesty of his

feelings for her, shone like a beacon in the dark and solemn eyes that held her own.

"Aren't you?" she whispered. "You *did* lie to me. You told me you weren't leaving."

Clark's eyes held shades of regret at the leaden sound of that. And he heard the personal betrayal beneath her words. She wasn't talking about staying in Metropolis, or at the paper. She was talking about staying with her. Or, more accurately, she was talking about him abandoning her. Just like Claude Rochert had done. In the basest of ways. He understood all of that. And it hurt him. No matter how much he emphasized with her, no matter how much he understood, what it came down to was him taking the flak for the bad guys in her life.

There was only one possible answer to that. Words just weren't enough. And besides she wasn't listening. His Mom had always told him that communication was key. If she refused to hear him, to accept what he was telling her, then the only way to get through to her was to make her listen to his heart instead of his voice.

He kissed her again. Gently and lingeringly, sealing his unspoken vow of a moment earlier in a simple, wordless pact that bespoke everything of his affection and regard and love for the woman he held close. More than he could ever say. He heard her moan, deep in her throat, and for a moment she clutched at him, pressing her body tight against him. Her lips came to life against his, her mouth fierce on him, as though she was desperately trying to reclaim something she had lost, grab hold and hang on tight, like someone clutching desperately at air for support before they went over the cliff edge and spiraled down into the chasm below for good and were lost to the darkness.

Desire and passion kindled and sparked and roared into bright, flaring life between them. Lost in the heat of it, it took Clark a moment or so before he became aware that Lois' soft, small cries had become breathless sobs against his lips. He pulled clear of her, concern dousing his ardor, but she burrowed blindly into the hollow of his neck, before he could get a proper glimpse of her face.

Confused, he slipped his arm tighter around her, pulling her close again. His free hand spread itself against the nape of her neck and then pushed its way into the soft fall of her hair, cradling her gently. Lois began to sob in earnest. Helpless, he simply held her. After a moment, he made out broken words among the pitiful cries muffled against the side of his neck.

"Clark...please, don't leave me. Not you too. Not you."

The mumbled, almost frantic words were more than just a plea. They had panic and terror in them and a child-like fear that made him mutter a soft imprecation and enfold her tighter into his embrace. He held her gently, not understanding, but simply soothing her as he stroked soft hands against her back and murmured reassuring words against her ear.

"It's okay, Lois. I'm here." His hand soothed a path against her hair as she trembled fiercely. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm right here,"

he said again and she found herself being led to the other side of the room.

She balked, trying to free herself irritably, but he persisted, undeterred, and somehow Lois found herself heading for the sofa, despite her protests. She looked up at him dumbly. What was it about this man that was so hard to fight against? To protect herself against? What was it about him that reached so deeply into her? She had always prided herself on being so self-sufficient, tough and resilient, able to cope with the hard knocks and deal with them. Yet this man seemed to just reach in and touch the most vulnerable parts of her soul every time. Reach through all of her defenses and find his way to her heart.

She gave up resisting it as he pressed her gently to sit. She stared at the fingers clasped tight at her lap as he left her. To Lois, dazed and miserably lost in her thoughts, it seemed like only an instant before he returned, hunkering down beside her as he took those hands, gently forced them apart and wrapped them around the warming mug of coffee he offered up.

"Here," he commanded firmly. "Drink."

She obeyed, too miserable and drained to protest any more. The coffee soothed its way down her throat to lay in a warming pool in her stomach, working its usual calm.

Clark said nothing, simply watched her until she finished, encouraging her quietly now and then, and then took the mug from her, placing it on the table beside the sofa's arm. He moved to sit beside her and took her hands in his as he leaned forward a little.

"Now," he said gently. "Talk to me, Lois."

Lois scowled, finding a flicker of annoyance to bolster her. "There you go again. Always with the talking. Don't you ever stop?"

Clark smiled faintly, hearing something in her voice that belied the sarcasm of the words. "Well, you know my opinion on that one. I'm open to suggestions," he added, adopting a deliberately lecherous tone in an effort to lighten the tension in the air between them. "If you have something else in mind you'd prefer."

For an instant the flicker of a smile tugged at her lips, then it was gone. She shook her head, pulling her hands clear of his. Clark's heart clenched as he saw the dark blight gather in her eyes again and the barriers go up. The wall between them may have crumbled slightly, but it was still intact. He cursed himself softly. Don't push, Kent, he advised himself. Slow and easy.

He regarded her evenly. "I didn't lie to you, Lois," he said finally. He sighed as she refused to look at him. "You didn't read the date on that letter, did you?"

He saw her frown. "Date?"

Clark shook his head. "You were right in a way, I guess. When I wrote that letter to Perry I had every intention of resigning. Of leaving Metropolis and never coming back. And I *did* leave. But I came back, Lois. *You* brought me back. I mean, there were other reasons why I

did and all of them were important to me, but mostly it was because I realized that I couldn't leave and never see you again, that I didn't want to stay away from you. I realized that I loved you, Lois. Even then."

"Then?" She stared at him, bewildered. Her posture straightened a little, losing some of its miserable slouch. "What are you talking about? How can you sit there and tell me you never intended leaving? I saw that letter on your - "

"But I didn't write it this week. It's dated November twenty-sixth. It's been on my hard drive for months."

"For...for - ?" she repeated slowly and then he saw the change creep over her expression, as she understood. "Oh." A soft flush crept over her cheeks. "During the heat wave when Superman left and you - " She looked up at him sharply, suddenly suspicious. "That was months ago. Why would you still have that letter to Perry on your hard drive? I know you, Clark Kent, you're positively obsessive when it comes to cleaning up your files. You don't keep things beyond a day never mind for months."

Clark shifted uncomfortably. She was right - although what she derided as a character flaw he saw as a positive trait. Being diligent in good housekeeping and keeping his files in order had saved his rear more times than he could count. And, incidentally, his partner's almost pathological denunciation of file management had gotten her into trouble just about as many times as that. But now wasn't the time to start a debate on the merits or otherwise of that.

"Yeah, I know," he agreed, a little sheepishly. "And I would have deleted it, when I came back, but..."

"But?"

He shrugged. "I kept it around to remind me. That running away doesn't solve anything. You have to stay and fight your corner, Lois, no matter what. Face up to your fears. If you don't, you let the bad guys win."

She stared at him in silence. "Like you think I'm running away," she said darkly.

He sighed. "No. I dunno. Maybe we both are."

Silence settled on them as they both considered that, lost in their own, muddled thoughts. Then Lois loosed a slow breath that was heavy with resolution. "No, you're right. I've been running away from this since it started. From you." She darted a small glance at him and then dropped her gaze to her lap awkwardly.

Clark stayed silent, letting her set her own pace, recognizing how hard it was for her to open up this way to him. To anyone. The hurt had been held inside her, festering for so long, that it had become a part of her and hard to let go.

"Okay," Lois said firmly. "Talk. Talk is good. Right?" She glanced up at him as though for confirmation and at his encouraging nod, went on, low-voiced and hesitant, "Claude Rochert."

Clark blew out a soft, thankful breath. Finally. "He left you."

She chuckled. A raw sound in her throat that held no humor in it. "They all did," she said. "All the way back to my father. He was the first man to walk out on me and they've been doing it ever since. You know, maybe it was me. I guess Daddy pretty much destroyed any trust I had. Maybe they sensed that. Maybe I drove them away. I mean - "

She frowned, "I don't mean - god," she shook her head sharply, "That sounds so...self-pitying."

"No. No, it doesn't." Clark reached out a hand to cover hers as they lay at her lap. "It's okay to be hurt, Lois. It doesn't mean you're any the less strong."

She was quiet again. He waited. Finally, she drew in a harsh, shuddering breath. "Claude. I told you about him." She looked at him, almost shyly, half puzzled. "You know, I've asked myself a thousand times why I did that. I'd never told anyone that before. I mean, most everyone here knew. He saw to that. He had a whole lot to say on *that* subject. But, I never...talked about it. Not to anyone."

Clark smiled. He lifted a hand, drew back a stray straggly of hair from her cheek. "Well, being chained to a pipe and waiting to die will do that to a girl," he said. "I guess I was the next best thing to the local confessional. *I* never told anyone," he added soberly. "I told you you could trust me on that."

"Do you know what that's like, Clark?" she said preoccupied with the unhappy run of her thoughts and barely listening. "To let someone so completely into your life, your...bed...to trust them enough to give yourself to them, everything you are...and then wake up in the dark alone. I didn't think there could be anything worse than that."

"There was worse?" Clark said, mock startled, using that humor, somewhat lamely, to divert her from sinking into an increasingly maudlin mood.

Lois nodded, too distracted to take the words at anything other than face value. "Sure there was worse. Worse was walking into the newsroom each morning knowing everyone there knew that you'd been...tossed aside like garbage. Claude had a...flair for embellishment. Worse was whispers at the coffee station that stopped dead when you arrived. The sniggers that followed you when you visited the rest room, the knowing looks, all the guys that asked you for a date, thinking you were everything he said you were. Worse was..." she sighed. "Worse."

Clark studied her with pitying eyes.

For a long moment Lois was lost, her gaze fixed on their entwined fingers, then she made a small movement, seeming to shake herself loose from painful memories. "It got better," she said. "After a time. I got to be old news."

"And Claude...?"

"Left. Well, he was a high flyer. No one expected him to stick around

long. He moved on to higher things. Bigger and better. Onwards and upwards." Her voice had taken on a sharply brittle tone. Now it faded into something more tentative. "Last I heard he was living with a former Miss PlayWorld in L.A. Working on one of those trashy tabloid entertainment shows."

Clark grimaced. "Hell on Earth."

Lois made an agreeing moue. She glanced up on him. "I kind of kept tabs on him for a time."

Clark paused. "Hoping he'd come back?" he said hesitatingly.

She shook her head fiercely. "God, no! No, I had this whole, big revenge thing planned. Keep tabs on him, bump into him just by chance five years later. He'd be a bum sitting at the corner of the sidewalk stinking of cheap wine and I'd sweep past wearing the latest fashion statement from Milan and sipping champagne in the back of my limo and throw him a few coins. Or order my chauffeur to." She sighed.

Clark smiled. "The best revenge is to live well."

"Something like that." She sighed again. "It never would have worked. He's living better than I am anyway."

Clark frowned. "Is he? Last *I* heard the model left him for a studio producer and he was hanging on to his desk job in front of the cameras by his fingernails. Going prematurely bald too," he said thoughtfully. "That kind of career is fickle. There's always some hot shot clawing their way up behind you. Word is Claude's out by the end of the month. Replaced by this year's brunette. I hear he's got a slight alcohol problem too."

He was suddenly aware of a silence that was intense. He glanced up to find Lois staring at him, mouth gaping slightly. She shut it with a snap.

"You've been checking up on Claude?" she said blackly after a moment's silence.

Uh-oh. "Um...well, yeah. I was curious." Clark shrugged.

"When?" Lois said frostily. "I mean - how long have you been - "

"Well, I just did a little...scouting around. After you told me about him." Clark sighed as he saw her eyes cool a little further. "I wasn't prying, Lois."

"No?"

"No. Like I said, I was curious. That was all. I did a check on him through the computer personnel archives. That was it. Then...well when we started to become friends, I..."

He stopped. Lois quirked her head at him, curiously. "You - " she prompted.

Clark looked a little disconcerted. "I...got angry. The more I knew about you, what a good friend you were, how..." he looked up at her

and smiled. "How great you were..." The smile deepened as she flushed a little. "I got angry. I just couldn't understand how he couldn't see what I did. So, I did some more checking, tracked him down..."

He trailed off with a shrug. For a moment there was an uncomfortable silence. Then Lois said, "Prematurely bald, huh?"

Clark smiled at the hopeful note in that. "This time next year he'll be spending his severance pay on hair transplants and long stay visits with Betty Ford," he assured her confidently.

Lois looked pretty content with that. She shook her head, "God, what an idiot I was! I - "

"No." Clark's grip on her tightened. "He was," he said gently. "And I'm kinda glad about it too."

"You are?"

"Sure I am. If he hadn't been an idiot I'd be pretty unhappy right now."

"Oh..." Lois said and then, smiling suddenly, perhaps the first genuinely warm smile of the evening, "Oh! I see..." She looked into his eyes and for a moment was lost, then the smile faded and she shrugged uncomfortably.

"Well, anyway, I told you. What happened with us. When I confronted him about the things he was spreading...well, he didn't deny he'd told them. He said - " She stopped abruptly, looking down at the hands pressed tight into her lap. Dimly, she was aware of a dull pain in her fingers as her grip tightened unbearably with the run of her thoughts and then Clark's hands were unlacing her fingers, taking her hands warmly in his own, his thumbs running absent, soothing paths across her palms.

"He said - ?" he encouraged softly.

Lois kept her gaze on their entwined fingers. "He...he said he was just adding to the locker room lore anyway. He said everyone knew..." she hauled in a low breath. "He said the rumors about me were what made him hit on me in the first place. He said I'd sounded real hot in bed and I...I hadn't disappointed him. He said everyone knew what an easy...that I'd - It wasn't true!"

She darted a quick look up at him, as though half afraid he might believe Rochert's lies and then ducked her head again as she whispered, "It just wasn't true. Claude...he wasn't the first man I'd...been with. But he might as well have been. The first...he was a guy I dated in high school. You know, but that was just...kid's stuff. I didn't really know what I was getting myself into to. We were in his parent's house and it just...happened. Afterwards, well, we just drifted apart. It was never really the big romance. I went to journalism school and he took a course in engineering at a college upstate. We traded a few letters and then he wrote to say he'd started dating a girl he'd met. By that time I wasn't surprised, or even really devastated. I think, mostly, I was just relieved."

Clark made a soft murmur of understanding and she smiled faintly.

"Just your usual, unremarkable teen romance really. After that, there were...some others. Not all of them were...were lovers. But Claude...Claude was the first man I really fell for. And now, I don't even know why."

"And when Bill Keneally talked to you at the Planet, you thought I'd betrayed you too," Clark said softly. "Lois," he reached out to put his fingers against the edge of her chin and turned her face toward him so that he could look earnestly into her eyes; into the wounded fear and hurt that shimmered there, in their dark, bewitching depths.

"I'd never hurt you that way. Don't you know that? Don't you know how special that night with you was for me? You said it was a fantasy. And it was, but not in the way you meant. You gave me something I'd been longing for a long time. Something I've dreamed about almost since the first moment I met you in Perry's office that day."

She gave him a wary glance, tinged a little with renewed mistrust, and he sighed.

"I'm not talking about...I'm talking about *you*. That night, in that garage, you gave me yourself. You trusted me. To take care of you, not to hurt you. That meant a lot."

She looked up at him shyly. "Really?"

"Sure. Lois - "

"But Bill Keneally said - "

"I told Keneally we'd had a wild night. That was true. But only in so far as we'd been locked in and had to talk our way out of trouble. He put two and two together because of the way you reacted when he mentioned it."

She looked up at him, stricken. "I didn't think - I was just so hurt that you would - oh, Clark! Now everyone knows and it's all my fault!"

"No, it's not. And no one knows. Well, not really. They might think they do, but if they can't get either of us to confirm it then they'll let it die. You'll see. Keneally and the others have been trying to get details out of me for days, but they're beginning to rag on Keneally for having an overactive imagination because I keep telling them he's crazy to think Lois Lane would want to do anything like that with some hick Kansas kid. You know the most depressing thing is that they seem to think that's a pretty reasonable reason for believing me," he added, mock wounded.

She smiled at this bald attempt to cheer her and then ventured uncertainly, "But I saw you talking with Johnson..."

"Johnson?" He frowned, obviously not remembering the incident. "Ken Johnson? That new guy Perry took on to augment the weekend city team?"

She nodded. "He was talking to you. And he looked at me. You both did and he...he laughed and slapped you on the back. Like he was...you know...congratulating you or something...?" she tailed off, flushing.

"Oh, honey." Clark hugged her to him, exasperated and pitying all at once. How could she have thought -- ? But he knew why. Rochert: the creep who had a lot to answer for. Did he know what he'd done to the fragile woman he was holding in his arms? How much of her trust and faith he'd twisted and destroyed? For a moment Clark felt a blaze of anger ignite in him. Maybe one day soon he'd take time to have a personal one on one chat with Rochert and enlighten him.

He tightened his grip on Lois, fiercely. "Ken was congratulating us on our story. He was congratulating *me* on having the good luck to work with the best reporter in the business. *His* words, not mine," he added with a smile. "I agreed with him though. Oh, and he wants me to put in a word for him if I ever decide to quit. He figures you're his shortcut to a Kerth."

"He...he does?" Lois brightened a little and then looked at him, anxiously. "But...you're not thinking of quitting. Are you." It was more of a command than a question.

"Are you kidding? I think you're my shortcut to a Pulitzer."

"And the Kerth?"

"Ah, now that I'm gonna get all on my own."

She smiled. "In your dreams, Kent. You need me and you know it."

He returned it. "Well, I won't argue with you there. You okay?" he asked softly, reaching up to stroke a hand through her hair.

She looked away from the compassion and - yes, love - in his eyes, her fingers twisting restlessly in her lap. "Yes. Clark..." She sighed uncomfortably. "I've been acting like a complete idiot, haven't I?"

Clark cocked his head at her, making a familiar moue of mock agreement. "Well...honestly? There wasn't much acting involved."

Lois lifted her head sharply and then, catching the twinkle of amusement in his eyes, bit back the reflexive retort that had darted to her lips. She ducked her head again.

"I should have believed in you more. In us. And - " she started again and stopped as he reached out.

"No." He shook his head as he set a finger gently to her lips, cutting off the blurted, embarrassed apology. "Just...don't confuse me with the other men in your life, Lois. Don't confuse me with him. I don't like it," he said and she blinked a little at the hard glitter in the eyes fixed intently on her, before it was gone. "We're not the same," he said, tone losing that momentary edge and turning gentle again. "Just trust me, okay? That's all I ask. Because, you *can* trust me, Lois. I wouldn't do anything to hurt you. Not anything."

"I know. And I do. Trust you, I mean."

"Then that's okay. Everything else, we can work out." He gave her a confident smile and his hand slipped warmly to the nape of her neck, drawing her to him for a soft, exploratory kiss. This time she met him eagerly, her lips moving vigorously beneath his own.

When he broke away from her finally, she stared up at him with eyes that offered him all of her secrets, all that she was and had been, all that he wanted to take from her and that she could give.

Clark smiled gently at her and stroked a finger against her cheek as he shifted, pulling her comfortably with him until they lay together on the sofa, his arms holding her against his chest, her head on his shoulder.

"I'll even forgive you that insult to my Dad," he told her, after a moment or so in which a new, companionable silence settled warmly on them.

Lois raised her head to look up at him, slightly startled. "I never insulted your Dad!"

"Son of a slimy cross-eyed toad, Lois?"

"Oh."

"Uh-huh."

Clark smiled as he watched her struggle with that, in her fragile emotional state perhaps taking him a touch too seriously, beginning to wonder if she'd truly offended him and how to make amends if she had, and then ducked his head to bestow a gentle kiss on her, chasing away her doubts. Lois snuggled close against his chest as he withdrew and he slipped an arm around her shoulders, drawing her against his side. He sighed softly, pressing his lips to the darkly gleaming spill of her hair.

"Lois Lane," he murmured. "Do you know what you've put me through this past week?"

"What *I've* - " she started indignantly, pulling clear of him and then losing the protest in a faint splutter as Clark ignored her, tugging her back and kissing her again as he shifted, pressing her beneath him. By the time he'd gotten tired, which wasn't soon, of exploring her lips, she'd softened in his arms like warm taffy, pliant and limp. His body on hers held memories she was eager to reclaim and that, until now, she'd been afraid to admit she missed. She moaned softly as he withdrew and then stared up at him with gently glowing eyes.

"Lois - " Clark started softly, "I wanted to tell you - "

She put a hand to his lips, stopping him. "No," she murmured. "Not now."

"But, Lois - " he protested as she let him go.

She shook her head fiercely. "No, I've had enough of explanations for

one night." She smiled at him as he looked nonplussed. "Hey, I'm fickle. So sue me. I mean it. I've had enough of talking too. We can do that later."

"Later?" Clark's eyes grew a sudden gleam of interest as he considered that. Then he reached out and drew a soft finger across the line of her jaw, following it's meandering path with his eyes. "So..." he said, "...if you're tired of talking...?"

Her smile widened. She reached for him again and he surrendered himself eagerly and blissfully to her need to explore him in kind. Their soft touches and wandering caresses grew more heated and then Lois pulled back sharply with a small gasp.

"Clark!" she blurted. "We have to go back to the Planet!"

Clark froze. Then he lifted his head from where he'd been nuzzling happily at the warm, soft-scented hollow of her neck to look at her in disbelief. "Lois, the story can *wait*," he told her firmly.

"No, no, you don't understand. Clark..." She wriggled until she had heaved him from her and was able to sit, hurriedly reorganizing her clothing and buttoning her blouse, which had curiously come undone somewhere among their explorations. He was darned good at that, she thought hazily. Too good. Something they were going to have to discuss. Later.

Clark had hauled himself to rest on one elbow and was staring at her in exasperation. "Lois - " He snaked an arm around her waist, tugging her back against him and ignoring her startled squawk as he nuzzled at the nape of her neck.

"No, listen." She twisted in his grip, trying to view his face and steadfastly ignoring the distractions of his lips against her skin, much to his annoyance. "When you were at the paper - did you turn off your computer?"

"My computer?" He frowned in confusion as he tried to distract her by nibbling at her ear. "No, I was so worried about you," he became momentarily much more interested in drifting soft, pliant kisses across the side of her throat and then continued, "...about what you were thinking, I just...took off looking for you. Oh!" His head lifted, his face changing as he realized what she was getting at.

"Exactly! If we don't get back there and turn it off, dump that letter - "

"Keneally's gonna have a field day!" Clark groaned. "They all will."

Lois wriggled free and struggled to her feet, grabbed for her coat and then came back to grip his arm and tug him to stand as he continued to stare into space, dismayed as he imagined the renewed upsurge in gossip that letter could cause.

"Come on!" she demanded as she raced for the stairs.

"No, wait, Lois, we don't *both* need to...why don't you stay here

and I can just - "

Clark sighed as the hard bang of the front door cut him off. Wistfully, he glanced at the sofa and then, sighing heavily, set off after her.

"Okay!" Lois straightened onto her knees from where she'd been mopping up the rusted coffee stains on the floor by the wall and glanced around the area critically. "I think that's everything." She turned her head to where Clark was seated at her desk. "You?"

He looked up at her and then squinted into the air before him, ticking off points on his fingers. "Dumped the shards of those mugs in the trash, put a note on Ginny's desk apologizing for breaking her pencil cup and offering to buy her another one..."

"Whose name did you sign to that?" Lois interjected suspiciously.

Clark gave her a steady look. "Mine," he said and, as she looked pleased with that, continued his interrupted inventory, "Gathered up all the pens..." he tilted his head in her direction, "mopped up the spills...switched off the computer...yeah, Watson, I think we've eradicated all evidence of the crime," he finished breezily, swinging his legs up onto the desk in front of him and settling back against his chair as he nonchalantly crossed his ankles and grinned at her.

Lois got to her feet and tossed the wet rag at him. "Memo for future reference, Kent," she said dryly as he caught it easily out of the air one handed before it smacked him in the face. "In any sleuth/sidekick scenario, I get to be the sleuth, you - "

" - I get to be the sidekick," Clark finished in tandem with her. His grin widened. "You like to be on top. Right, Sherlock?" He winked.

Lois sighed. "You're not going to let me forget that one easily, are you?"

He shook his head solemnly. "Not in this millenium."

She sighed again. "Right."

Clark chuckled. He sat up, swinging his feet off the desk and then rose to his feet, holding out a hand. "Ready to go?"

Lois nodded with a soft smile, placing her hand in his with an easy familiarity that set Clark's heart to dancing. "Let's go...Boy Wonder."

Clark hitched a brow at her and she grinned up at him before letting him lead her for the stairs.

"Oh - wait!" She stopped, shaking her head as she eased herself out of his embrace. "Hold it, I forgot something."

"What?" He followed her curiously as she retraced her steps. By the

time he reached her side, she'd already flipped on her computer. He watched in silence as she pulled up a file.

"The Henley story? You want me to edit it for you?" he asked, giving her a facetious grin.

"No."

Clark's grin spread at that curt rejection.

"I read it," he informed her, deadpan, as he smoothed out his expression. "It's pretty good stuff. There's only one 'r' at the start of 'mercenary'," he added recklessly. "And only three periods in an ellipsis, not six." He reached out to lay a finger against the screen in emphasis. "And here, where you say Henley walked a narrow gap between businessman and gangster, well, strictly speaking - "

Lois nudged him with a warning elbow without looking up from her study of the screen. "Do you know what they say about unwanted critics, Kent?"

"Good for the soul?"

"The cause of many a high crime statistic," Lois corrected as she gave him a sour glance.

Clark grimaced. "I guess Franklin P. Jones was right, 'Honest criticism is hard to take'," he added the quote, blandly. "'Particularly from a relative, friend, an acquaintance or stranger.'" Lois paused and then turned her head to look at him with an intent expression that made him a little nervous. "Smart ol' Franklin missed one out, didn't he?" she said snippily.

Clark frowned. "Did he?"

Lois nodded. "It's not so welcome from a lover either," she told him.

Clark blinked. "Lover?"

Lois hid a smile and then turned back to the screen with a slightly more jaunty air about her now. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Clark silently roll the word over on his tongue experimentally a few more times and then a wide, cheese-eating grin spread itself across his face as he obviously decided he liked the sound of it. She tried not to laugh. But her own grin deepened as she leaned over her desk and tapped briskly on the keyboard.

Brought out of his state of bliss by the noise, Clark watched the emerging keystrokes with interest as they appeared one by one on the screen in rapid succession. He turned his head to look at her as she finished.

"I meant it, you know. I gave it to you."

Lois nodded and then leaned against his side, laying her head to the solid perch of his shoulder as she stared at the screen:

Organized Crime Links at Millcorn? On Site Sabotage at Henley

Construction Probed By Lois Lane and Clark Kent.

"I know," she said quietly. Which was, she belatedly understood, the simplest of all the truths she'd learned in the past hours. He wasn't Claude Rochert. Who, among other things, had stolen a story from her. Not given her one as a gift. She reached out, face softening, and placed the tips of her fingers to the screen. The simplest of truths. And, perhaps, the most important of them. Certainly, as a metaphor for all that the man standing beside her had given her...love and honesty, respect and a sense of her own self-worth, and a renewed understanding that it **was** possible to trust...it held up pretty well.

She smiled up at the handsome face watching her curiously and took back her hand. "And now...I'm giving it back."

Clark smiled. He slipped an arm around her waist and nuzzled affectionately at her hair a little, then straightened with a sigh.

Lois shifted, rubbing her cheek lightly against his sleeve. "They look good together," she said.

Clark tilted his head to look at the screen again. "Yeah," he agreed approvingly. "They do, don't they." He looked away and down at her as she turned her head to view him and then he smiled and kissed her lightly.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome...partner." She grinned against his lips and kissed him back.

Clark kissed her again, a little deeper this time and with a deal more fire and then disengaged himself from her reluctantly. He reached over and hit the enter key, then turned off the machine. He held out his hands, face solemn as she put her fingers in his and looked up on him curiously.

"I'm glad you think of me that way, Lois. Partner...friend..." his voice softened, "...lover...because, well I want to be all of those for you. And more. Whatever you want, but," his tone stiffened into resolve, "we have to talk." He reached up a soft hand and placed it against one cool, satin cheek. "There are some things I have to tell you. Important things. Things that I need to tell you. Want to. Because...well, because, even if we don't spend the rest of our lives together I want you to know that I trust you too. Enough to know that, whatever happens, wherever we go from here, I know that you'd never betray me. Never do anything to hurt me. And because you trust me that way. And I should trust you too. With everything. I mean, I **do** trust you. And I want you to know that. I want you to know that I trust you every bit as much as you trust me."

He paused and then let a small smile soften the sudden intensity of his expression as he watched curiosity and a deep sense of awe grow on her face.

"Wow. That's a whole lot of trust," she said, blinking slightly, and he laughed, a deep rumble of amusement that filled her chest with warmth and jittered in her heart.

"I guess," he said. He shrugged, glancing down at his feet as he shuffled them a little. "I'm not that good at saying - "

She cut him off with a soft finger pressed against his lips and he subsided.

"I wasn't making fun," she said.

He took her hand into his strong grip. "I know." He put up his free hand and moved it softly through her hair. The slight uncertainty in his eyes faded, his expression growing so intent, so somber, that it frightened her suddenly. He took a hard breath.

"But...not here," he decided, glancing around him briefly at the darkened newsroom. "C'mon," he stroked a gentle finger briefly against her cheek, "I'll walk you home."

Lois nodded compliantly, looking up curiously into his face as he guided her towards the ramp, a little disappointed that he had backed off, but eager to go, curious about his mysterious air. It sounded as though she was in for an interesting morning.

Clark drew her into his arms again and kissed her warmly once she was standing before him, a long, companionable exploring of her lips as they waited for the elevator to arrive.

They drew apart only when the ping of its bell interrupted their slow melding, and even then they lingered, with tiny pecks and touches of their lips, before they finally pulled away.

"Clark?" Lois said as he stepped back to allow her to precede him into the elevator's bright interior.

"Mmmmm-hmmmm," he responded absently, slipping an arm around her waist to pull her against his side as he stepped in after her, as though unwilling to let her go even for the seconds it took to reach around her and press the lobby button.

Held tight and secure in the circle of his arm, Lois leaned in close, her fingers playing a suggestive path at the neck of his shirt. "When you take me home..." she said breathily. "We won't *just* talk though." She looked up at him coyly from under her lashes. "Will we?"

"No, Lois," his soft chuckle echoed round the empty newsroom behind them. "We probably won't 'just talk'."

"Good." She snuggled closer. "So...you gonna make me feel wonderful again, Sunflower Boy?"

"Sweetheart," he said with a grin, pulling her towards him for another soft kiss as the elevator doors slipped to a close. "I thought you'd *never* ask."

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End

file.